



A Scandalous Spring

Seasons of Scotland Book 3

Sophia Nye

Thank you for downloading my book!

Enjoy your journey to the Highlands!

A Scandalous Spring

Seasons of Scotland Book 3

Sophia Nye

Copyright © 2021 by Sophia Nye

Cover by Melody Simmons

First Edition published June 2021

All rights reserved. This ebook is licensed for your personal use and enjoyment. It may not be re-sold or reproduced in any form or given away.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious and are used fictitiously. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

For Cian-

*Lover of mud, collector of worms,
The joy you take in the simple things is inspiring.
I can't wait for our next adventure.*

*Love always,
Mom*

Table of Contents

Cast of Characters

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Epilogue

About the Author

Cast of Characters

At Roxburgh Castle

Lady Sybilla Blakewell

English noblewoman visiting Roxburgh with her father

Lord John Blakewell

English lord visiting Roxburgh; Sybilla's father

Lady Ismay de Beaumont

Daughter of an English lord; Sister of Lady Eleanor de Beaumont

King David of Scotland

King of Scotland, thought by many Scots to have English-leaning sympathies; Gemma's uncle

Malcolm (Máel Coluim) mac Alexander

Illegitimate son of King Alexander I of Scotland; Leader of a rebellion against David for the kingship

Clan Calder

Fintan mac Gille

Ronan's man-at-arms; Older brother and sole caretaker of Morna, Colin, Brianna, Caitrin, and Lochlann

Morna nic Gille

Fintan's sister; Age 15

Colin mac Gille

Fintan's brother; Age 13

Brianna nic Hamish (Bree)

Fintan's half-sister; Age 6

Caitrin nic Hamish (Cait)

Fintan's half-sister; Age 3

Lochlann mac Hamish (Lochie)

Fintan's half-brother; Age 6 mos.

Laird Ronan Calder

Laird of Clan Calder; Husband of Adelina

Adelina Matheson

Daughter of a wealthy English merchant; Ronan's wife; Accomplished scholar

Clan MacMaster

Laird Alec MacMaster

Laird of Clan MacMaster; Aidan's twin brother; Husband of Lady Eleanor de Beaumont

Lady Eleanor de Beaumont (Nora)

Daughter of an English lord; Wife of Alec; Sister of Lady Ismay de Beaumont

Aidan MacMaster

Commander of the clans' forces; Twin brother of Laird Alec MacMaster; Husband of Lady Gemma FitzRoy

Lady Gemma ferch Nesta FitzRoy

Wife of Aidan MacMaster; Daughter of King Henry I and his mistress Nesta ferch Rhys, a Welsh Princess; Healer

Isobel MacMaster

Alec and Aidan's sister

Jennet MacMaster

Alec, Aidan, and Isobel's mother

Clan Drummond

Laird Alistair Drummond

Laird of Clan Drummond

Donnan Drummond

Son of Laird Drummond

Prologue



October 31, 1136
Calder Keep, Scotland

The first thing she felt was fire. A burning like nothing she'd ever known consumed her side where she'd been stabbed.

Instinctively her hand covered the wound, now spurting blood like a leaky waterskin. She looked at the crimson liquid first in disbelief, and then fear. A rushing sound filled her ears, drowning out the screams from the villagers as Calder burned to the ground around them.

'Twas at that moment that Lady Sybilla Blakewell realized she was no longer standing. Strong hands, freezing cold against her burning skin, lifted her. The world fell to fire and darkness.

Sybilla awoke to a rough jostling. Before she opened her eyes, she felt as though she were riding a horse while laying on her back. It took several long moments before she realized she was being carried. Squeezing her eyes tighter, she suppressed the urge to shout in pain.

Where before her side felt as hot as a blacksmith's forge, tendrils of cold now reached toward her from the same spot. She couldn't feel her toes. Her fingers cracked like ice. Everything felt further away.

She must be dying.

"You'll be alright, lass," a deep, masculine voice whispered softly from above her.

Sybilla relaxed instantly, but kept her eyes firmly shut. "Are you my guardian angel? Am I already dead?"

"There'll be no more talk of angels and death," he said sternly. "You've lost a lot of blood, 'tis all. We'll get you patched up in no time."

At the change in his voice, Sybilla's eyes fluttered open. Her angel's brownish-gold hair glowed like amber in the firelight surrounding them. He looked straight ahead, but Sybilla could make out the chiseled lines of his jaw, the rough, stubbly bottom of his chin. Though she didn't see any wings, she knew he was an angel sent to

save her.

She sighed, closing her eyes once more. The cold, autumn air seeped into her bones, and the lure of sleep offered escape from the bitter chill.

He shook her in his arms. “Stay with me, lass. Ronan’ll have my head if you go dying on me.”

Sybilla smiled lazily, unable to move much else. “I thought there was no more talk of dying.” The words took great effort, too much effort. She drifted into a half-sleep, not quite noticing the smoke and flame surrounding them as they walked through the burning village.

The first thing Sybilla heard was sobbing. Heart-wrenching, penetrating sorrow. Searing pain bloomed where the blade had cut into her side. Shifting her weight to the opposite side helped, but the effort of moving made her groan in agony.

“Sybilla?” The sobbing halted. “Oh, my darling, you’re alive!”

She recognized her father’s strained voice.

“I thought I’d lost you, too,” he whispered.

“No, papa,” she assured him, “I’m right here.”

Looking around, Sybilla saw that other women rested in makeshift beds and pallets in the cottage. Most chatted quietly with one another. One or two were asleep. Sybilla lay in the only wooden bed.

A willowy, wrinkled woman moved from one bed to the next, talking softly with each of the other women.

“I can’t lose you, Sybilla,” her father said.

Sybilla sighed. Twelve years ago, her mother, two older brothers, and baby sister had all died of a plague. Every day since, her father had said those words to her, as though saying it aloud would weave some sort of protection around his last daughter. “You won’t lose me,” she replied wearily, just as she always did.

The door to the cottage opened slowly, its creaking hinges turning every eye toward the sound. The angel she’d seen in her dreams the night before entered, only now she recognized him as one of the men-at-arms she’d seen around the keep over the past weeks.

Her pulse raced. She must be in a grave condition, indeed. If

only she could remember who he was when he wasn't a guardian angel.

"Lord Blakewell," he greeted her father, offering a tray filled with food and drink.. "Lady Sybilla," he said, turning to nod at her. "I thought you might be hungry after last night's ordeal."

"Thank you, Fintan," her father answered.

Fintan! She knew she'd heard his name before. In her current state, Sybilla found it difficult to distinguish her dreams of last night from reality, let alone recall the name of a man she'd met in passing weeks ago.

Fintan set the tray on a nearby table. "I also thought you might have some questions. Ronan is a bit—busy. Though I know he'd much prefer to visit you himself."

Ronan! Lord, she'd all but forgotten him. He was Laird Calder's only son, and the entire reason she and her father had come to the Highlands in the first place. They'd been betrothed, but the entire arrangement went up in flames—literally and metaphorically.

Her father motioned for Fintan to pull up a chair next to Sybilla's bed. "I can only imagine what sorts of problems he's dealing with at present, between taking over as laird and his father's terrible injuries," her father said. "I will speak with him when he has the time."

As Fintan and her father exchanged niceties and portioned out the meal, Sybilla tried to recall the previous night's events.

Fire. She remembered a good deal of fire. Then cold. Bitter cold. The glowing face of an angel, illuminated in the dark of the night, carrying her to safety.

And Lucy, her lady's maid, was there. Just before the knife cut into her side. Had Lucy stabbed her?

"What happened?" she interrupted, forgetting entirely that the men had been chatting while she grappled with her memories.

Silence. Her father and Fintan looked at her, pinning her with equally intense stares. After a moment, her father buried his face in his hands. Fintan's pale blue eyes never strayed.

"Your maid, Lucy," he began gently, placing a heavy hand atop her arm. "She set fire to the keep and most of the village last night.

She stabbed you, and ran off in the chaos.”

Only one part of his explanation surprised Sybilla. “She escaped?”

Her father looked back up at her, his lips a tight line. “Not for long,” he growled.

“Ronan had to let her go in order to save your life,” Fintan explained. “You’d have been dead if we didn’t stop the bleeding.”

“Ronan?” Sybilla recalled her rescue in the arms of a warrior the night before. A warrior she’d mistaken for an angel, with honey-gold hair and a halo of firelight. But it had not been Ronan. She hadn’t been so far gone as that, had she? “But,” she stammered, “but I thought—”

Fintan’s warm hand squeezed her arm, sending a tingle straight to her shoulder. “Ronan entrusted you to my safekeeping,” he answered. “Though I wouldn’t expect you to recall as much.”

The two men finished their meals hastily, famished from the excitement of the previous night. They talked through the events, the people, the aftermath.

Sybilla couldn’t eat a thing. The smell of food turned her stomach, and she wasn’t entirely certain she had the energy to dive into the meal as her companions had done.

Fintan stood, gathering the empty dishes and leaving what remained on the tray next to them.

Her father stretched and yawned. “‘Twas good food and even better company,” he said to Fintan. “Thank you.”

This was it. She had one question left to ask, and it had to be now, before her only source of information walked out the door.

“Will I live?” Sybilla shook as she gave voice to the question that had plagued her since the moment she’d felt the knife slide into her flesh.

“Aye.” Fintan’s assurance washed over her like a wave, giving her the hope she so desperately needed. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Chapter One



Feb. 17, 1137
Calder Keep, Scotland

Until two months ago, Fintan mac Gille could count on one hand the number of times he'd overslept in his two and twenty years. Since then, it had become something of a regular occurrence. Worst of all, though he lay abed far too late into the morn, he seemed to feel more tired with each passing day.

Right now he had no time to wonder over his growing fatigue. His laird needed him at the keep, and, judging by the sunlight streaming in his window, he was long overdue. The spring thaw was a few short weeks away, and there was much to do before the season began in earnest. After the fire last fall, it had taken most of the winter for Clan Calder to rebuild, and a few buildings yet needed mending.

A shriek of frustration brought him straight to his feet. Caitrin, his three-year-old sister, sat in a weepy pile on the rush-covered cottage floor. Her golden curls bounced with each wrenching sob.

Fintan noted her half-removed shift and quickly divined the wee lass's problem. "Morna!" He called for his sister, next eldest after Fintan, though barely out of childhood herself. Walking over to Cait, he gave her a comforting pat on her tiny heaving shoulders.

The sobbing continued. Morna didn't come.

Fintan had no time to dally about with dressing a babe. He was already late. Hastily pulling a woolen tunic over his *léine*, he rushed toward the door, grabbing his scabbard and plaid on the way.

Where in Christendom was Morna? He called for her again, still without answer.

"Fintan, will you help me?" Cait looked at him with big, blue, tear-filled eyes.

"Of course, *a ghràidh*," he sighed, setting down his scabbard almost as soon as he'd picked it up. "I'll always help you."

"Unless you die, too," Cait mumbled, tugging on her left sleeve viciously.

Fintan helped her out of her old shift and tunic and into her new ones. It had been two months since their mother died, and he still didn't know what to say when his youngest siblings spoke of it.

When his father had died a decade ago, Fintan had stepped up to be the man of the family and keep everyone safe, fed, and clothed. But he hadn't been alone then. His mother had handled all of the tears, all of the anguish, all of the questions. And again last summer, when his stepfather Hamish had died in battle, his mother had been there. This time, 'twas all on him.

Fintan helped Cait to her feet, straightening her dress for her while she ran tiny fingers through her hair in a futile attempt to tame her wild curls.

He smiled at her. "There," he cooed, "you're the fairest lass I ever saw."

Without warning, Cait burst into tears once more.

Fintan's heart sank. He never got it right. He took a deep breath before trying again. "'Tis alright, *a ghràidh*." The words rushed out. "I meant it as a compliment."

"I'm not like you," she sniffled, "I'm not like Morna. I don't want to be a baby."

"You're not a baby," Fintan answered, desperate to end the increasingly uncomfortable conversation.

"I couldn't put on my clothes!" Cait cried. "How can I be grown up if I can't get dressed?"

Fintan looked at his devastated baby sister. "When I've had enough ale, I can't get dressed either," he said in mock seriousness. "Does that make me a baby?"

"No!" Cait giggled.

Fintan put a hand to his chest. "Phew!" he exclaimed. "Thank you for clearing that up for me!"

As much as he loved a good laugh with Cait, Fintan really needed to leave. After the entire episode with the tunic, Morna still was nowhere to be found.

"Morna!" he tried again.

"Would you stop yelling!" his younger brother, Colin, shouted.

Fintan had overlooked him entirely, mistaking the jumble of blankets for a poorly-made cot. He knew lads just coming of age were given to excessive sleeping, but this was ridiculous. “God’s bones, Colin! Why are you still abed?” Fintan’s frustration was finally winning out over his patience. “Get up and watch Cait so I can get to the keep.”

“I don’t need watching!” an outraged Cait interjected. She reached for a cup of water on the table, but it slipped from her tiny hands and shattered at her feet. A moment later, she’d dissolved into tears once more.

Colin angrily tugged on a boot. “Morna took Lochie and Bree to the creek for water,” he grumbled, searching for his other boot.

“Why would she take Bree and not Cait?” Fintan groaned.

Cait cried louder. Colin shrugged, finding his other boot near the door.

“Colin, you have to stay so I can get to the keep,” Fintan called as Colin headed outside the cottage.

“I have to do no such thing,” Colin shot back. “It’s not my job to watch babies.”

“I’m not a baby!” Cait wailed, collapsing onto the floor dramatically.

Colin rushed out the door.

Fintan ran after him, but the lad was out of sight. He ran his hands through his hair, scouring the village for a way out. One day soon, he’d need to sort Colin out. The lad needed to be helping at home, not running from his troubles. If Colin helped Morna, Fintan could focus on upholding their family’s duty to the clan. Instead, he spent more and more of his time dressing wee lasses and rocking bairns.

Just as he was preparing to bring the wee lass with him to the keep, Morna came into sight. She carried a bucket of water and a babe. There was no sign of Bree.

“Where’s Bree?” he called when she was near enough to hear him.

“She was sleeping when I left,” Morna replied.

Fintan took the bucket from her and set it down inside the cottage. He looked from the still-sobbing Cait to exhausted Morna. Dark shadows grew beneath her eyes. She hardly smiled anymore. Two months ago, she'd been a sweet, cheerful lass giggling with her friends and teasing the lads. It broke Fintan's heart to watch her wasting away at the height of her youth.

Morna hurried over to Cait, hugging her warmly and picking up the pieces of the shattered cup while she balanced baby Lochlann on her hip. He took exception to her jostling him about and joined in his sister's wailing.

Fintan bit his bottom lip, rubbing his face with his hand. He would have a lot of explaining to do when finally he made it to the keep.

Leaving Morna to deal with the two screaming children, he started looking for Bree. The wee lass was always into mischief, more so after their mother had passed. He made it halfway around the cottage when he heard Bree's belly-deep laughter.

He found her behind the cottage, covered from head to toe in freezing mud, splashing and digging like a wild animal.

"Bree!" Fintan shouted angrily. "What are you doing? You're going to freeze!"

Ignoring his tone, Bree stood and hopped from one foot to the other, making giant muddy splashes as she walked over to him. "'Tis spring!" she answered cheerily. "The ice melted, and now there's mud!"

Fintan sighed, breathing deeply in a near-futile effort to control his ire. "'Tis not spring yet," he scolded, "and that mud is as cold as the ice it came from. Get in the cottage and get those filthy clothes off."

The lass skipped around the corner without even a nod of apology for her misbehavior. He'd have to give her a talking to later.

Fintan knew the exact moment when Bree entered the cottage. Morna groaned in agony at the sight of Bree's muddy state, setting in with a good scolding.

"There you are! I've been looking all over the keep for you."

Fintan spun around to find Ronan, laird of Clan Calder, approaching. Donnan, the laird's kinsman, walked beside him. "Laird, I am so sorry," Fintan said.

Ronan frowned at him. "No need to apologize. I can hear well enough to know what's kept you."

Fintan winced when he heard more shouting from inside the cottage. By the sound of it, Bree wasn't thrilled about getting cleaned up.

"I was just on my way over," Fintan explained.

"Tis no matter," Ronan replied, looking to Donnan. "I need you to go with Donnan to get the MacMaster women."

"We couldn't find them," Fintan objected, "we searched for weeks in the fall."

"David has them," Donnan explained. "At Roxburgh."

Fintan ran his hand through his hair for what felt like the hundredth time since he'd woken that morn. "Why me?" he asked. "Surely you realize I can't just leave Morna alone for two weeks or more."

"You helped me before," Donnan answered. "It seemed to reason you'd want to see the job finished."

"Adelina has offered to help Morna," Ronan added.

Fintan thought he'd die of mortification. The laird's own wife minding his siblings like a nursemaid. She had more important tasks, Fintan knew. "Ronan, no," he protested, "I couldn't let Adelina put herself out—" he began.

Ronan cut him off sharply. "I believe Adelina is my concern," he said. "And she's thrilled at the prospect of having some children about the keep. I insist."

Fintan reluctantly followed his laird back to the keep, saddling and mounting his destrier in a haze of anxiety. His mother had only been gone for two short months. His siblings still mourned her, each in their own way, and he knew 'twas the cause of much of their mischief. Morna and Colin had grown silent of late. Bree made messes and played tricks on folk. Cait cried at the drop of a cup, her tears always waiting to fall. Aye, they were three handfuls and then some.

But Lady Adelina had only two hands.

Even as he readied to leave, he could hear a bairn wailing somewhere near the edge of the village. Was that Lochie? What if Morna needed help? Could it be wee Cait? Fintan's head spun as he contemplated all the ways his family might need him when he was gone.

Less than an hour later, Fintan rode out of Calder alongside Donnan. Even after they'd been on the road the better part of the morning, Fintan couldn't quite get the sound of a crying babe from his thoughts.

Chapter Two



February 22, 1137
Roxburgh Castle, Scotland

Lady Sybilla Blakewell deplored her life. She knew, of course, that she ought to thank the Lord every day that she didn't live in poverty, that she never had to break her back with hard labor. The trouble was that Sybilla was not entirely certain she *was* grateful for her life of leisure, for she didn't feel that she was truly living.

"You're awfully quiet," her father, Lord John Blakewell, observed lightly.

"I've a lot on my mind of late," she replied, walking alongside him down the empty stone corridor.

He nodded. "Ah, that's right. You and Lady Ismay are making some new dresses, aren't you? I nearly forgot."

Sybilla sighed. Dresses. She should've known better than to answer her father truthfully. He'd tell her, once again, that there was nothing wrong at all and she was in need of a new project. "Have you made any progress with the king?" she asked, changing the subject. "It's been almost a month."

"I think we're nearly there." His voice thrummed with excitement, something Sybilla wouldn't know anything about. "If things go well at this meeting, I'm hopeful that we'll finally see justice done."

That sentiment brought Sybilla some small relief. She and her father felt responsible for the destruction of Clan Calder the previous autumn. It had been her maid, Lucy, who had caused the fire and attacked the laird, after all.

They had been visiting Calder to arrange a betrothal between Sybilla and the laird's son, Ronan. Obviously, *that* didn't work, or Sybilla wouldn't be wasting away with nothing more than dresses to occupy her time. Little did they know they'd brought with them a rebel out for blood.

After the ordeal, Sybilla and her father stayed in Calder for over a month while she convalesced from her wound. By that time Ronan

had off and married the hero of the day, Adelina.

Once Sybilla had healed enough to travel, Lord Blakewell went straight to King Stephen of England, vowing to Ronan that he would see justice done for the damage they had unwittingly caused the clan. As it turned out, King Stephen had little interest in an obscure Highland clan, and no means to assist besides.

And so, here they were, walking the halls of Roxburgh in an attempt to get aid from King David of Scotland.

“What did he say?” Sybilla pressed him.

“He needs to improve his relations with the clans,” her father explained. “I believe I’ve nearly convinced him that this would be a good way to start.”

Just then, they reached Lady Ismay de Beaumont’s room. Sybilla knocked on the smooth wooden door, hurrying inside as soon as Ismay opened it.

“I’ll stop by after I’ve finished with David,” her father called before continuing down the corridor.

Sybilla collapsed onto the bed as Ismay shut the door.

“He’s *still* walking you around the castle?” Ismay’s exasperation only deepened Sybilla’s frustration with her father.

“He’s going to be walking me around until he can’t walk anymore,” she groaned. “He was bad before I was stabbed. Now he’s unbearable.”

Ismay joined her on the bed. “You need to tell him,” she insisted. “He won’t know you’re upset if you don’t tell him.”

“I tried!” Sybilla sat up, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling. “He just started talking about dresses. He refuses to admit that I’m unhappy doing nothing!”

“Wait a few more days and try again,” Ismay said, “You never know when it might finally work.”

Sybilla waved her hand dismissively. She knew her father well enough to know it would never work. ‘Twas about time she gave up and took matters into her own hands, if only she had any notion of what that might entail. “Enough about me,” she whispered, happily moving the conversation away from her own troubles, “What’s going

on with you and Taran?"

Ismay's eyes lit up at the mention of the guard's name. "I think he likes me," she replied in a hushed tone.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Sybilla slid closer to Ismay so they could whisper more easily.

"There isn't much I can do," Ismay said sadly. "I'm hardly allowed out of my room."

Sybilla thought it over. Ismay, as well as two Highland women, were being kept at Roxburgh by King David until their clan took an oath of loyalty to him. Ismay was English, like Sybilla, and the daughter of a notorious spy, so she was kept locked in her room much of the time.

Though Ismay was a petite, delicate-looking young lady, Sybilla realized after a few conversations that her mind absorbed details as readily as the ground soaked up rain. Ismay didn't speak of her family much, but 'twas clear that little got by her without note. It seemed King David, too, had realized Ismay's remarkable skills of observation.

"If you can't leave your room," Sybilla said slyly, "I suppose you'll need to get him into it."

Ismay squealed in delighted shock at Sybilla's bold suggestion. "Do you think he'd be interested in me?" Her voice caught in her throat at her own question. "Really?"

Sybilla looked at the young beauty sitting beside her, sharp as a blade and always smiling. "Any man who isn't is a fool," she reassured Ismay sweetly. "You're a good match and he'd be daft not to see it."

"My father's not exactly a selling point around here," Ismay commented sheepishly, "what with all the warmongering."

"I've spent all of half a year in Scotland, and I can assure you that your father isn't the first man to start a feud with a Highland laird. Just don't mention him to Taran. It's not like he'll be stopping by for a visit."

Ismay smiled sadly. "There's something else, too. I didn't want to say anything until I was certain."

"Oh, no! What is it?"

"We're leaving."

Sybilla prayed she misunderstood. She'd only just met Ismay a few weeks ago. After a lifetime locked away in her keep, finding such a dear friend was a blessing she wasn't ready to part with just yet. "Leaving?" she pressed.

"Aye," Ismay answered. "I've heard talk that David is expecting an oath from Laird MacMaster any time, and I saw two Highlanders ride into the courtyard not long before you arrived."

Sybilla's heart skipped a beat. "Highlanders?" she asked, trying her best to seem merely curious. "What did they look like?"

"Like Highlanders," Ismay snorted with amusement. "One of them I recognized from my stay with Clan MacMaster. The laird's cousin, I think. The other I've not seen before."

Though it annoyed Sybilla to no end, she found her thoughts straying often back to her time in Calder. Or rather, to a certain Highland warrior in Calder. Tall, dashing, with fair hair and strong arms. Some nights when she shut her eyes a vision of him carrying her to safety against the glow of distant flames replayed over and over, more like a dream than a memory. Her guardian angel.

"Sybilla?"

Sybilla shook the fantasy from her mind. "Sorry," she said.

"What were you thinking about?" Ismay asked, concern etched into her delicate features.

"Nothing," she lied, smiling.

Ismay sat back against a pillow, regarding her through narrowed eyes.

Sybilla sighed. She'd forgotten that Ismay saw more than most. As Ismay contemplated, Sybilla prepared herself for how she'd answer the inevitably insightful question.

Truthfully, as much as Sybilla dreamt of her Highland hero, she wished she could get rid of her ridiculous obsession. Sybilla was many things, or would be as soon as she was freed from her father's overbearing grasp. She was going to have all of the wonderful and exciting experiences that he never allowed. She would lead a life of pure, unadulterated adventure, just for the thrill of it. Once she was free from her father, she would *live* her life. And no part of that

involved a romantic infatuation with a man she barely knew. What if he tried to keep her locked away just as her father did?

“Every time I mention Highlanders, you get the same distant look about you,” Ismay observed aloud. “What memory keeps drawing you back?”

Sybilla inhaled deeply. Ismay, knowing full well she was being naïve, had confided her feelings for Taran to her. The least Sybilla could do as a true friend was return the favor. “No one else knows.” Quickly and quietly, she told Ismay the story of how Fintan had saved her from the fire, carried her to safety, checked in on her every day. Aside from Adelina, he had been the only regular visitor during her month-long stay. And now, months later, his memory continued to visit her.

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation. Taran, the object of their earlier discussion, stepped inside. Ismay’s cheeks turned a gorgeous shade of rose and she looked around the room awkwardly.

“The king requests that you pack your bags,” he announced after clearing his throat, “He says to be ready to leave come morning.”

He was a strong, handsome man, only a few years older than Sybilla. And while not a Highlander, Sybilla saw his affection for Ismay in his eyes every time he gazed at her. ‘Twas a crime that the two of them would be separated before anything could come of it.

If only there were something she could do.

Chapter Three



She and Ismay spent much of that time finishing the dresses her father had mentioned. Sybilla's gown was deep violet. Not the shade worn by kings, but one that reminded her of the wildflowers she saw when she rode through the fields in spring. 'Twas also fitted as tightly as she could manage without being unseemly. If her father was going to force her to spend her days making gowns, she was going to make the most scandalous gowns in Christendom.

Ismay whistled low when they'd finally gotten Sybilla's gown laced. "Your father is going to be furious," she said with an approving look. "Your paps are fair spilling out of it."

"Good. 'Tis time he was something other than irritating."

A few hours later, Sybilla's father came to collect her for dinner.

"I see you're wearing that dress you've been working so hard on," he observed with a frown. He took hold of her elbow as though she were a babe just out of swaddling. "'Tis far too tight, but we're already late. You're not to wear it again unless you alter it."

She gritted her teeth. "There's something other than dresses I've been meaning to speak of," she said in measured words.

Her father regarded her more seriously. "I hope you're not going to complain of your boredom again," he chided, "I've told you countless times you've many skills yet to learn. Weaving, perhaps?"

Countless indeed. "'Tis not just boredom," Sybilla replied, making an effort to calm her voice, "I feel useless. I could at least help to run the household when we return—"

"I've told you time and again, my dear, you're not like other young ladies. You're too special to risk so carelessly. If you wander about the estate to see to its needs, you could end up falling and injuring yourself." His words came out quicker with each sentence. "Or you could catch an illness spending time around so many people, going out in inclement weather. No, Sybilla," he said, his voice suddenly finding clarity, "I'm afraid I can't allow it."

Sybilla watched her father spiral into a storm of his own making.

“Am I too special?” she ventured, “Or are you too scared?”

He said nothing, but his nostrils flared in aggravation.

“How do you expect me to fulfill my duties as lady of the house when I eventually marry? What would have happened to me if I had married Ronan? Are you planning to move to my husband’s home so you can continue to walk me down corridors and stairwells like an infant?”

Lord Blakewell swallowed hard. “I believe your hunger has gotten the better of you, my dear. Let’s hurry along to the hall. But not too quickly,” he added, “one can’t be too careful.”

Sybilla fought to control her rising ire. That had gone about as well as she’d expected, of course. She’d told her father a thousand times that she was unhappy, coddled, suffocated. He never heard a word she said.

For some reason, this time it hit her harder. An invisible branch within her had snapped, and Sybilla knew she wouldn’t bother talking with her father again. The time for words had passed. Sybilla was ready to take action.

They entered the great hall at Roxburgh after most of the hundred-odd diners had already arrived. King David spent much of his time at this holding, so it was well-staffed and bustling with retainers, family, and visiting lords. A royal court in all its splendor. Her father steered her toward their seats.

Sybilla pulled her arm free from his grasp. “I’d like to find Ismay before I sit for the meal,” she explained.

For a moment she believed her father would argue. Instead he turned away, only to be stopped by King David himself.

“Lord Blakewell,” the king, a tall, rounded man of middling years, greeted him. “I’m glad I found you. Allow me to introduce the new guests who pulled me away from our meeting earlier.”

Sybilla stopped moving, torn by indecision. Her mind told her to make quickly for Ismay and away from her father’s cloying grip. Her heart told her to turn around and get a good look at the Highlanders, who no doubt stood beside the king at this very moment.

“Donnan of Clan Drummond and Fintan of Clan Calder are here

on behalf of Laird MacMaster.”

Sybilla spun about far too quickly. Standing before her, tall and handsome as ever, was quite literally the man of her dreams.

He didn’t see her.

Should she step forward and join the introductions? She already knew Fintan, so ‘twould be perfectly acceptable to greet him, right? Her heart hammered beat after beat of indecision.

Before Sybilla had a chance to get her head on straight, excited shouts barreled in from behind her.

“Donnan!” Isobel, the sister of Laird Alec MacMaster cried, rushing to embrace the warrior who stood beside Fintan.

“How good it is to see you!” Isobel’s mother, Jennet, added.

Ismay followed a few steps behind the MacMaster women, stopping next to Sybilla to allow Isobel and Jennet to steal Donnan away. “What’s wrong, Sybilla?” she asked after taking one long look at her.

“Sybilla?” Fintan’s deep, smooth voice repeated her name. Then, finally, his eyes found hers. He smiled. “How are you?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Ismay said, not sounding the least contrite, “but I’m afraid I missed introductions. I’m Lady Ismay de Beaumont.”

“Fintan mac Gille of Clan Calder.”

Sybilla watched as first recognition, then mischief lit Ismay’s eyes.

“Fintan,” Ismay repeated thoughtfully. “What a pleasure. Sybilla was just telling me how much she missed Calder.”

“Ismay,” Sybilla warned, grabbing her friend’s arm as though that might stop her mouth.

“Is that so?” Fintan asked, apparently unaware of the battle beginning between the two ladies.

“Yes,” Ismay answered, not letting Sybilla get a word in, “though as I understand it things got a bit heated.”

Lord, she was going to kill Ismay. Warmth flooded her cheeks—a rarity for Sybilla. Until this moment, she thought herself nearly immune to embarrassment. Ismay, it appeared, was intent on proving

otherwise.

“Would you excuse us for a moment?” Sybilla grabbed Ismay’s elbow, pulling her quickly to a nearby alcove. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

“Helping,” Ismay replied with a wink.

“Heated?” Sybilla hissed. “How is that helping?”

Ismay looked at her pointedly. “There was a fire, wasn’t there?”

“You weren’t talking about the fire and you know it.”

“Aye,” Ismay admitted, “but he doesn’t. Yet. And he never will if you don’t take this chance. Do you think you’ll be seeing him again once we leave tomorrow?”

Ismay had a point there. Sybilla desperately needed an adventure, and since her father hovered at every conceivable moment, this was about the best opportunity to have one. “What should I do?” she asked.

“It depends what you want,” Ismay replied.

“A kiss would be exciting,” Sybilla thought aloud. “A dance would be fun, but not out of the ordinary.”

“Dancing with a Highland warrior is a habit of yours, then?” Ismay teased. “Let’s start with a dance, and see if we can’t get that kiss.”

Sybilla couldn’t keep a grin off her face. “Fine,” she agreed, “but no more talk of heat.”

“We’ll see,” Ismay answered happily, heading back into the fray before Sybilla could protest.

They returned to Fintan, who was miraculously still available for conversation. He had relocated to a tapestry-covered wall not far from where they’d been introduced, arms folded across his chest, watching the bustle of activity in the large hall.

She could do this. She could tease her way to a kiss. She’d played coy with more than a few men. Though, admittedly, it had never amounted to much. And Ismay was right—this was a rare opportunity, indeed.

“I understand from Ismay that your companion, Donnan, is a relative of Laird MacMaster,” Sybilla ventured once they stood beside

him. “But how is it that a warrior from Calder ended up here on an errand for another clan?”

Fintan regarded her quietly for a moment, shifting his weight.

“’Tis an honor to help my laird’s kinsman.”

Ismay widened her eyes at Sybilla, but said nothing.

Sybilla swallowed nervously. When he’d visited her in Calder after that gallant rescue, he’d been so tender and concerned over her. She didn’t know what to make of his seriousness.

“Of course,” Sybilla pressed forward, determined to get at least a dance. A kiss was looking less likely by the minute. “I only wondered what brought you here.”

“You mean why did Laird MacMaster ask a common soldier to assist in so important a matter?”

Sybilla’s hand went absently to her neck. Lord, she was making a mess of it. She didn’t usually have so much trouble talking with men.

“Of course not,” she said quickly. “I—”

“He didn’t,” Fintan interrupted coolly. “Donnan asked me to accompany him.”

“’Tis a long trip to stay for only one night,” Ismay observed.

“The MacMaster wants you ladies back as quickly as possible,” he replied, “And I have no desire to stay here a moment longer than necessary.” Fintan’s attention was fixed across the room as he answered.

Sybilla was started to get annoyed at his rudeness. Why on earth was he being so difficult? “Perhaps ’tis for the best,” she muttered.

Fintan cleared his throat, standing straighter. “Lord Blakewell,” he began.

“No,” Sybilla couldn’t contain herself any longer, “I’m *Lady* Blakewell.”

“I believe he was addressing me, dearest.”

Sybilla sighed, placing a hand to her forehead and hopefully shielding Fintan from a view of her utter embarrassment.

Her father placed a heavy hand on her shoulder, turning her to face him. “We should be finding our seats,” he declared, eyeing her low neckline with a frown. “The meal’s to begin shortly.”

Leaving Fintan behind her, Sybilla followed her father back to their table. She sat silently, tearing into a warm roll, pulling fluffy pinches of bread out one-by-one.

“I see you haven’t forgotten our time at Calder as quickly as I had believed,” her father remarked after settling onto the bench beside her.

“I’m certain I have no idea what you mean,” she lied.

“If it’s a Highlander you want, I’ll find you another laird. In fact, it might be a way to tie ourselves even more closely to David. Or, if you’d prefer, I could see about a match with David’s son, Henry. I think you could win him over with that charm of yours.”

“It appears that what I want doesn’t matter a whit.”

“Don’t be petulant,” he grumbled. “I know you’re cross about our conversation earlier, but you’ll come to understand my decision in time. Especially once you’re a parent yourself.”

Sybilla scoffed, setting down her mutilated roll. “I see,” she hissed, “so ‘tis too dangerous for me to walk about the keep unaccompanied, but risking my life in childbirth doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course it bothers me,” her father couldn’t keep the strain of concern from his voice, “but I have no control over it. You must marry. Therefore, you’ll more than likely have children. God knows I’ll be a mess while you’re birthing them.”

“What are you trying to say?”

Her father leaned closer to her, ensuring his words found her ears only. “Fintan is a fine man, dearest, and I understand your fascination with him. But we will make you a more suitable match.”

“Of course, papa,” Sybilla mumbled tightly, hating every word.

‘Twould seem that she wouldn’t be getting even a dance out of Fintan tonight. Though she’d dearly love to blame it on her interfering father, Sybilla knew she’d botched her attempt at getting Fintan interested in her. Or had she?

He’d been staring over her head for most of the conversation. Had he seen her father approaching? Sybilla ruminated on her failed attempt to entice Fintan as she ate. Why had he been so cold toward her? And, more importantly, what could she do about it?

Chapter Four



As Fintan sat listening to Jennet and Isobel MacMaster talk poor Donnan's ears off, he mused on his unlikely reunion with Lady Sybilla Blakewell.

His interactions with her back home in Calder had been uncomfortable at best. When she'd first arrived, with the intention of marrying his laird and friend, Ronan, she'd seemed a touch predatory. He'd overheard her make several unladylike suggestions to Ronan. He could only imagine what she'd let loose in private conversations.

Then, when they'd found out that someone in the clan was plotting murder, the colorful Lady Sybilla was a primary suspect, to his thinking.

Once the fires began and Lady Sybilla was wounded, Fintan had a change of heart. He'd judged her far too harshly. She'd just been a young woman trying to make a life for herself, and ended up near death in the process.

'Twas guilt, he'd told himself, guilt for all the assumptions he'd made on her character that drove him to such concern for her welfare. Deep down, though, he'd slowly recognized 'twas more than that. Every day that he came to visit her, he thought of her more the next. One morning, not long before she and her father left Calder, he realized he looked forward to seeing her.

It had been foolish then, knowing she was far and above the likes of him, to entertain fantasies of her. A noble-born English woman, particularly such a beauty, would marry a high-ranking noble lord. Tonight, showing his attraction to her would have been downright dangerous. Donnan, Jennet MacMaster, Sybilla's father, and the king of Scotland himself were all present to ensure such a disgraceful match would never see the light of day. Not that he'd ever even consider marrying the lass.

Aye, he'd worried and fussed over her when she was wounded. He'd even come to care for her. And there was no denying that she was stunning. But Sybilla Blakewell had never been anything other

than an acquaintance to Fintan, and he had every intention of keeping it that way.

A notion he might believe if he could only stop staring at her. That purple dress clung to every inch of her luscious body, driving him to distraction. How had her father let her wear such a thing?

“What are you brooding over?” Donnan asked during a rare respite from his kinswomen’s attentions. Though he was seated beside Fintan, they’d hardly exchanged a single word in all the excitement of the family’s reunion.

“Nothing,” Fintan grumbled, quickly shifting his gaze from Sybilla to his newly-arrived trencher of stew.

Donnan wasn’t fooled for a moment. He looked up in the same direction Fintan had been staring, then leaned in closer. “Does ‘nothing’ have gorgeous wheat-colored hair?”

“Nothing” doesn’t exist,” Fintan shot back. “‘Tis *nothing*.”

Donnan snorted in disbelief. “So, what, we’re here for one night and she’s far and above your standing, so you’re just begging off?”

“Donnan,” Fintan warned.

“If I were you, I’d give that lass a reason to remember you. She clearly wants one.”

“Enough!” Fintan shouted, unable to contain his anger. Sybilla wasn’t some common whore, to be propositioned and forgotten.

“‘Tis true, she does,” Lady Ismay added, sitting down on the other side of Fintan.

“What is going on?” Fintan groaned, “Is there some conspiracy to see me behave like a beast?”

Ismay scoffed. “‘Twould appear you need no help for that.”

“Well I couldn’t very well stand there and play at courting her. Her father made that quite clear.”

“What?” Ismay’s mouth opened in shock.

“Her father’s already after you?” Donnan asked, patting Fintan’s shoulder hard. “Well done.”

He didn’t need this. Fintan stood, excusing himself from the table.

Ismay hurried after him. “Wait, Fintan,” she called, grabbing his

arm in a corridor just outside the hall. “Please, let me help my friend. What did Lord Blakewell say?”

“How will this help, exactly?”

“Please,” Ismay begged.

She reminded him so much of his sister Morna that he gave in far too easily.

“When the two of you went off to giggle in the corner, Lord Blakewell came over to me and told me in no uncertain terms I was to show no interest in his daughter. I have no desire to cross him—”

“So you pretended disinterest in Sybilla!” Ismay blurted, finishing his sentence.

Fintan exhaled loudly. “No,” he explained slowly, as though to a child, “I have no interest in Sybilla. Why does everyone think otherwise?”

Ismay winked at him, her lips forming half a smile. “Don’t worry,” she whispered conspiratorially, “Your secret’s safe with me.” Before he could argue, she disappeared back into the hall, leaving him alone at last.

Was there something in the ale? Why was everyone behaving so ridiculously? Even his old friend Donnan wouldn’t let up about Sybilla.

He had to admit she wasn’t unappealing. And, aye, mayhap he’d been staring a bit. But she was hardly the only beauty in Scotland. Lady Sybilla Blakewell was wrong for him in every conceivable way. She was a noble and he was common-born. She was English and he was a Highlander. But, most importantly, she was looking to marry and he couldn’t possibly worry about a wife right now.

He had enough trouble managing his brothers and sisters. It gave him palpitations just imagining adding someone else to the household, at least until he could get Colin to cooperate and return the family to some sense of normalcy.

No, Fintan wasn’t interested in Lady Sybilla, and he wasn’t going to be making any overtures. Now if he could only convince everyone else of it, he could put the matter to rest.



“He’s definitely interested,” Ismay told Sybilla as they settled before the fire in Sybilla’s room.

Sybilla wasn’t so sure. “But he was so distant and distracted,” she argued, “I don’t understand how he could be interested and behave like that.”

“He told me your father warned him to leave you be.”

Sybilla gasped in spite of herself. “He didn’t!”

Ismay nodded. “While we were talking, your father approached him to make sure nothing happened.”

Rage rippled through Sybilla, leaving her with so much unspent tension that she had to stand and pace before the fire. “How dare he!” she cried. “First, he treats me like a child, ordering me about as though I can’t possibly manage to live my life without his aid. Then, he doesn’t trust me to have an innocent conversation with a man *we already knew*.”

“You were trying to get him to kiss you,” Ismay reminded her.

Sybilla whipped her head about to look at her friend. “Who’s side are you on?”

Ismay leaned back into her chair thoughtfully, ignoring the jibe. “Well, what are you going to do, then?”

“I’m going to show him who he’s dealing with.”

“Your father or Fintan?”

Sybilla leveled a look at Ismay. “My father,” she drawled. “I have an idea, but I would need your help.”

“Of course,” Ismay answered without hesitation.

“I should warn you, if we’re found out, it will be an absolute scandal.”

Ismay grinned at her wickedly. “Even better.”

Chapter Five



February 23, 1137
Roxburgh Castle, Scotland

The following morning, Sybilla's father walked her to the stables for her daily ride. It had always irked her that he'd let her climb atop a horse and go riding on her own, something potentially quite dangerous, yet he insisted on accompanying her everywhere on foot. She'd never brought it up, however, for fear of changing his mind.

For Sybilla, riding wasn't just a pastime. It was her entire existence. The only excitement, the only exhilaration, the only challenge. She could escape her prison for a little while. Make use of the muscles she might otherwise forget she had.

Her mother had shared her love of riding. 'Twas something they'd done together every day until her mother grew ill. The morning of her mother's passing, Sybilla ran straight to her horse. Since that day, she had never missed a ride. Though she dared not ask her father, Sybilla suspected it was because of her mother's memory that her father allowed her this one indulgence. He didn't care much for riding, for which Sybilla was eternally grateful. If he did, he'd probably follow her on the trails as well.

The morning sun was just cresting the horizon as Sybilla took position atop her palfrey. Its rays painted the rolling hills in a pale yellow-orange, promising a glorious dawn.

She dug her heels in, urging the sturdy animal away with all haste, letting down her guard and breathing the open air. Trotting down the motte, across the bailey, and out of the great stone gate, Sybilla felt alive again.

Riding hard toward the nearby forest, she prepared to put her plan into motion. She and Ismay had stayed up into the night plotting every detail. They were going to switch places.

Ismay desperately wanted to stay with Taran, who appeared to genuinely return her affections. Other than her sister, who had married the laird, Ismay had no ties to Clan MacMaster. She'd be just as happy wed to a Lowlander if she could manage it.

Sybilla needed to get out of her father's reach. Aside from her ride each morning, she was kept under lock and key, watched as a hawk trails a mouse. This was her chance to run.

She was to take her morning ride as usual. Then, while out in the woods, she would stop and put on one of Ismay's dresses, wearing a heavy veil. She would ride the palfrey near to the keep, but walk inside the courtyard so as not to draw attention. Then, she'd wait in the courtyard for the rest of the party and join them as they left Roxburgh. Ismay would spend the morning somewhere out of sight, and by the time anyone realized what had happened, Sybilla would be long gone.

It didn't matter where she ended up. She could figure that out later. All she could think of was her freedom.

Excitement thrummed in her veins. Fallow fields and herds of cattle drifted by in a haze, obscured in the early morning mist. Today was the day she would escape for good.



Fintan and Donnan were ready to leave long before breaking their fast. For the sake of the women, however, they waited until the bell rang for terce, nearing midmorning, before retrieving them. Donnan stood, nodding in the direction of the ladies' quarters, and started walking.

Fintan stayed put. "I was thinking," he began.

"That's never good," Donnan interrupted with a wide grin.

"I was thinking," Fintan repeated, ignoring Donnan's comment, "that I would like to have a few words with Lord Blakewell and his daughter before we go."

"I don't think Lord Blakewell will be leaving you alone with his daughter anytime soon."

"I feel badly about how I treated her last night," Fintan said defensively, "I don't want to leave without saying something kind. To *both* of them."

"Tell yourself what you must," Donnan grumbled, continuing toward the corridor, "I'll meet you in the courtyard. Soon."

"I won't be long."

Fintan strode quickly to the opposite side of the hall, to a different corridor leading to the nicer guest quarters.

Roxburgh Castle was one of the finest in Scotland. It stood as a stronghold against English invasions, a first line of defense when those greedy bastards started wandering north. Rumor had it that the usurper Malcolm, who had led a series of rebellions against David several years ago, was imprisoned somewhere in Roxburgh.

David himself had built it, beginning construction as soon as he took the throne. And, since David was more Norman than Scot, the keep was built in the Norman fashion—out of stone and atop a motte. After spending time in Roxburgh's walls, Fintan grudgingly admitted to himself that the fortress would not easily fall.

The royal family spent much of their time at Roxburgh as well, rendering it exquisitely decorated by Queen Maud. Tapestries depicting the great victories of David lined Fintan's walk to the Blakewell quarters. Their bright colors lifted his spirits with each step. Perhaps 'twould be a good day. After all, they were heading back home.

Right before he reached his destination, the corridor opened up on his left, revealing a large enclosed garden. Sitting on a bench, deep in the foliage, was Ismay. He nearly continued down the corridor, until he noticed her move when she caught sight of him. She sank lower on the bench. She was trying to hide from him.

It seemed he wouldn't be bidding the Blakewells farewell after all.

"A lovely morning, isn't it, Lady Ismay?" he called.

She sank lower on the bench, almost laying atop it now.

"I can see you, milady," he shouted wearily. "I'm afraid I'll need to escort you to the courtyard. We're about to leave."

A pale blonde head popped out from behind a shrub. "Oh, Fintan. I, uh, I didn't see you there." The words came out in a jumble, much as they did when his siblings were trying to come up with a believable lie. She stood, straightening her dress, and took a few painfully slow steps toward him.

"We'll need to move faster than that if we're to get home before

we die.”

Ismay chuckled half-heartedly, her eyes scanning the corridor behind him. Looking for a way out, no doubt. “I, um, I need to get a few things from my quarters before we leave.”

“Like what?”

“My cloak.”

Fintan sighed. “Alright, let’s go.”

“No!” Ismay cried. “I mean, I can manage on my own. I’ll meet you in the courtyard. I need my veil as well.”

Fintan pulled his hand down his face. “Why do you need a veil?”

Ismay scoffed in mock offense. “I am a lady, sir. I can’t possibly be seen without a head covering.”

“You didn’t wear one at dinner last night,” he pointed out, “and no one will see you today except your family.”

Her lips tightened into a grimace. She was running out of excuses, and they both knew it.

After a good deal of grumbling on Fintan’s part, and a good deal of whining on Ismay’s, they emerged into the courtyard at long last. And, without a moment lost, Ismay began screaming.

Chapter Six



Sybilla's morning had gone exceptionally well thus far. It had taken some finessing to get into Ismay's slightly smaller bliaut, but she'd managed it in the end. The wind had tried to take her veil as she pinned it, but she'd won that battle as well. Aye, 'twas the beginning of a wonderful adventure.

Striding proudly through the front gates at Roxburgh, Sybilla said a quick prayer that she'd make it to the courtyard without difficulty. If one of the guards recognized her, if her father found out what she was doing, she'd be well and truly locked away. She didn't even want to think on what he'd do if he caught her trying to run.

It didn't matter, however, because the Good Lord clearly heard her plea. The moment she reached the gate, a commotion broke out on the other side of the lower bailey, drawing all the guards far from Sybilla. She had no idea what happened, though it sounded as though something had gone missing. She thanked God as she made her way to the courtyard at the top of the motte that her morning had been uneventful.

Sybilla loitered in the courtyard for nearly an hour before preparations began for the MacMasters to depart. A group of four servants worked quickly to load supplies onto a cart and packhorse before readying a palfrey for each lady. A groom and the stable boy saddled the two destriers ridden by the Highland warriors.

Just as her feet were getting tired of standing around, Donnan, Jennet, and Isobel entered the courtyard from the keep. All three appeared in high spirits, no doubt eager to be on the road homeward. But Fintan was nowhere to be seen.

Sybilla wandered nearer to the three palfreys, intending to climb atop one as soon as Donnan and the MacMaster women headed in her direction. Until Fintan finally appeared, dragging Ismay behind him.

Sybilla's heart pounded as the situation sank in. Ismay had been found out. She could no longer escape as they had planned.

Ismay's eyes found her just as that realization hit, and her dear

friend started screaming. Full on, louder than a babe, Ismay dug her heels into the courtyard and wailed.

“Ismay, what in God’s name—” Donnan tried to shout over the din, hurrying to help the incredulous Fintan.

Ismay screamed even louder. She waved her arms like a madwoman. She stomped her feet and made an absolute fool of herself.

Everyone was looking at Ismay now. No one was looking at Sybilla. This was her chance.

Without a moment to lose, Sybilla tiptoed to the supply cart. Pretending the sacks and satchels were a little pond, she dove beneath them, burying herself swiftly in the cart’s contents. As soon as she’d tucked her feet neatly beneath a sack of waybread, Ismay’s screams stopped.

“What did you do?” she heard Donnan shout.

“Me?” Fintan sounded furious. “How is this my doing?”

“Well I certainly wouldn’t have let her make such a scene,” Donnan boasted.

Fintan’s belly-deep laugh rumbled across the courtyard. “Oh!” his bemused voice shot back. “You wouldn’t have *let* her, eh? Clearly you’ve not spent much time minding children.”

Ismay screeched at that statement. “Child!” she shrieked.

Sybilla could hear her indignant stomping all the way in the cart, and had to stop herself from laughing.

“You’ve been wailing as loudly as any babe I’ve heard, milady,” Fintan scolded her.

Sybilla couldn’t make out much of the conversation after that, as everyone had stopped shouting.

A few moments later, heavy footsteps approached the cart.

Sybilla held as still as a stone. Was someone coming to lift one of the bags? Would they drop something heavy on top of her?

Ismay shrieked again in outrage. “Don’t you touch my packages, Donnan Drummond, or I’ll start screaming again. I swear it.”

God bless Ismay.

“You start wailing like a banshee again and I’ll gag you for the

trip home,” Donnan ground out.

“I’m sure the laird would love to have you explain why you gagged his innocent young sister-in-law,” Ismay replied sweetly.

“Innocent my arse,” Donnan mumbled grumpily.

A loud smack and a whinny later, the cart started rolling, shaking every bone in Sybilla’s body as it thumped its way over the cobblestone courtyard.

Sybilla smiled to herself. It looked like she would escape after all.

Chapter Seven



February 23, 1137
Edynburg, Scotland

In true spring fashion, a relentless cascade of rain began just as they arrived in Edynburg. It had only been a day since they'd departed Roxburgh, but the hours felt interminable.

Dismounting from his horse in front of the inn, Fintan shrugged off a feeling of foreboding. That morning in the courtyard, propelled into action by Ismay's tantrum, his inability to seek out the Blakewells faded into insignificance. Since then he'd endured hours of silent contemplation, interspersed with excited chatter from Jennet and Isobel. When left alone with his thoughts, Fintan found himself in a spiral of guilt, confusion, and a nagging suspicion that Ismay was up to something.

The Ram's Head, a two-story establishment boasting the finest ale in the Lowlands, appeared lively as ever. Hopefully there were still rooms available to rent.

"I'll see if they can take us," Fintan called to his companions over the downpour. "Wait in the stables." Trudging through the thickening mud, he made his way toward the front door.

He really shouldn't feel guilty. Aye, he'd been a bit short with Lady Sybilla at dinner. But aside from a brief month of supping together, Fintan really had no ties to the Blakewells. He had reminded himself of that fact repeatedly over the course of day. And yet, here he was, hours later, wracked with guilt that he'd not said farewell.

He stalked into *The Ram's Head* like a rain cloud on a summer day, wondering why he couldn't move past his tumultuous morning. A bard urged the drunken revelers into shouting the refrain of a bawdy drinking song. The heat from the roaring fireplace offered welcome respite from the chilly evening rain. The sweet smells of the inn's kitchen should have lightened his spirits, even if the laughter about him hadn't.

Pushing past a pair of men in heated disagreement, Fintan waved over the innkeeper, an impressive man with an even more

impressive beard. “Two rooms. Please.” It irked him even more that politeness had been an afterthought. What was wrong with him?

“We’ve only one.” The innkeeper appeared unshaken by Fintan’s sour mood. “For a quarter-penny you can sleep in the stables or the common room.”

Fintan secured the room, paying the quarter-penny extra and exiting hastily from the din that surrounded him.

Perhaps his lingering misgivings weren’t so bad after all. He’d come to know Lady Sybilla and Lord Blakewell during their stay in Calder. ‘Twas only natural that he regretted parting without a farewell. After all, ‘twas unlikely he’d ever see them again.

What truly bothered him, he admitted grudgingly, was the fact that his plans had been thwarted by circumstances beyond his control. He regretted his behavior and was robbed of the chance to apologize. That would upset anyone with common decency. Not to mention Ismay’s odd behavior. First she’s hiding, then she’s screaming, and now she’s quieter than a child with a sweetmeat.

Walking back outside, the damp spring weather hit Fintan even harder. The rain had softened to a mist and the entire city glistened in the fading light of day.

“Well?” Donnan stood beside his horse, waiting.

Jennet, Isobel, and Ismay had gathered around the cart, whispering secretively and wringing out their soaked garments.

“We’ve one room and a floor space,” Fintan announced.

“Better than a puddle of mud.” Donnan shook out his plaid, which he’d been using as an extra cloak to shield him from the rain as they rode. “Best get settled inside before the rain starts back up.”

Fintan nodded in agreement, heading to the cart to get their necessities and his whittling supplies. Whenever he felt frustrated, there was one thing that lifted his spirits without fail. The skill of working wood, coaxing shapes from a piece of pine or cedar, had passed down from father to son for generations beyond count. His father had taught him when he was young, fostering in him a lifelong love of woodworking. Fintan had tried many times to teach his brother Colin, but the lad hadn’t even a passing interest.

When he neared the cart, the women stopped talking. Their eyes turned on him like archers on an enemy army.

Reminded of Ismay's mysterious behavior, Fintan instantly grew wary. He reached into the cart to grab his woodcarving satchel, but was stopped short by Ismay.

"No!" she shouted, lunging forward and grabbing his arm. "Please, allow me. It's the least I can do to make up for my behavior this morning."

Now he knew she was up to something. "Don't be silly," he said as smoothly as he could, "You've nothing to make up for."

Donnan sputtered in shock. "What he means is there's no way you could make up for such nonsense."

Ismay's hands flew to her hips. "Well, I can't say I find your opinion surprising Donnan Drummond," she huffed. "But be that as it may, I'd still like to try." She smiled sweetly, squeezing herself between Fintan and the cart.

He waited for her to get the bag.

She didn't budge.

Donnan lost patience first. "Are you going to get it for him?"

Ismay shuffled her feet. "I, um. I was going to unload the cart while you two investigate the room for us."

Fintan leveled her with his best "I-know-you're-up-to-trouble" look before gently moving her out of his way. Then he lifted his bag from the cart.

And the bag beneath it, a bright blue one he didn't recall packing, *wiggled*.

He grabbed the blue fabric. It took several seconds for Fintan to realize that what he now held was not any foodstuffs or clothing. 'Twas a person's ankle.

Fintan glared at Ismay. "Who is it?"

She met his eyes with a challenge. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He quickly moved the remaining baggage to one side of the cart, revealing that they did indeed have a stowaway. Lady Sybilla waved at him innocently, smiling.

Donnan swore an oath.

“Donnan!” his Aunt Jennet reprimanded.

Isobel silently watched the situation unfold.

Ismay’s shoulders slumped.

Fintan could barely control his rage. All thought of guilt or words unsaid fled in the face of his anger. “How could you?” he growled.

Sybilla sat up in the cart, stretching her arms. “Oh, ‘tis not that bad,” she replied dismissively. “I promise I won’t give you any trouble on the journey. You’ll hardly know I’m here.”

Unbelievable. She was worried they were upset at her company? “You have no idea the trouble you’ve already caused,” Fintan replied. “Your father will believe we’ve kidnapped you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She carefully slid out of the cart, brushing the dust and dirt from her vibrant gown. “He knows you’d never do such a thing.”

“He knows nothing!” Fintan finally lost control of his temper. “He doesn’t know where you are, he doesn’t know if you’re with us or not, and he certainly knows very little of my character. He doesn’t know anything except that you went missing the same day we left Roxburgh.”

Without another word, Sybilla bolted toward the inn.

Fintan watched her long enough to be sure she went inside before turning to Donnan. “We have to take her back.”

Donnan nodded grimly. “We turn around in the morning.”

Everyone grabbed their bags in silence before following Sybilla inside *The Ram’s Head*. It appeared they’d entered not a moment too soon, either. The bard still sang and the crowd still drank. The fire yet roared, but a new guest had appeared.

Even though he was furious with Sybilla, Fintan’s muscles tensed when he caught sight of her. She sat at a table as far from the revelry as possible. A tall man of middling years sat too close to her, whispering in her ear. Her hands fidgeted anxiously in her lap, just below the table. Her eyes darted about the room desperately. Sybilla was scared.

Fintan knew why. He punched Donnan's shoulder to get his attention, nodding in the direction of Sybilla's table. "Malcolm's here."

Malcolm mac Alexander, nephew of King David and would-be usurper of the throne, leader of a rebel army, and escaped prisoner, sat beside Sybilla.

Chapter Eight



He hated her. And he had every right to, of course. He'd made it perfectly clear that he thought she was a self-centered, foolish girl. Though Sybilla had to admit that his concern at her father's distress held merit, she still felt he'd overreacted a bit.

She pulled open the giant wooden door. *The Ram's Head* towered above her, one of the largest buildings she'd seen that wasn't a castle. The tantalizing scent of freshly baked bread and the lure of a warm fire drew her deep into the cavernous room. Sybilla politely worked her way through the thick crowd until she found a table tucked into a cozy corner. Her wet clothes made a loud squishing sound as she plopped into a chair facing the doorway.

Perhaps she hadn't thought her plan all the way through. And, aye, perhaps she'd not fully considered how it might affect anyone else. But how could she convince Fintan that it had been an honest oversight, particularly while he was so cross with her? Did he hate her now? He certainly didn't think well of her, of that she was certain.

A serving maid wandered near the table, and Sybilla took the opportunity to flag her down. "Supper and ale, please."

When she spoke, several men loitering nearby turned to look at her. One stalked over. He was tall and fit, but not as large as Fintan and Donnan. Still, he had the look of a warrior. His heavily bearded face made his expression difficult to read.

"You're English." It wasn't a question, and it wasn't a kind observation. His low voice rang with insult at her presence.

Sybilla said nothing.

He slid into the chair next to hers. "What's an English lass doing all alone in Scotland?" He leaned in close, his breath stinking of ale. "You're not welcome here."

The men he'd been speaking with took a step closer to her table.

Sybilla didn't move. She looked around the room, hoping to find a friendly face, or at the very least the serving maid. Anything to break the mounting tension.

“I said, you’re not welcome here.”

Chills ran up her back and down her arms. In all her life, no one had dared to speak to her thusly. Somewhere between her fear and doubt, Sybilla began to see just how sheltered her life had been.

As her eyes raced through the crowd, she finally found Fintan and Donnan striding toward her. Jennet, Isobel, and Ismay followed close behind. Relief washed over her.

“I’ll thank you to leave the lass be.” Fintan placed a hand on the hilt of his sword.

The gruff man beside her looked first at Fintan, then Donnan. When he noticed Jennet, he sat back in his chair. “It’s been many a year since I’ve had the pleasure of Clan Drummond’s company,” he drawled. “Please, join us.”

“Shouldn’t you be locked in a cell a day’s ride from here?” Donnan asked, sitting opposite the man.

Sybilla was dying to ask who on earth he was, but knew better than to speak again until things had resolved. Whoever he was, her companions didn’t have a high opinion of him. Glares, frowns, and grumbles accompanied their arrival at the table. Fintan sat on her other side. The three women took the remaining seats, though none sat next to the odious man.

He smiled at Donnan. “I’ve decided to relocate.”

The serving maid returned to the table with Sybilla’s supper, awkwardly halting the discussion.

After she left, he leaned toward Donnan across the table. “Now tell me, what business do you have traveling with the English? Has your treachery come so far?”

“Aye, because an English lass is such a threat to Scotland.” Donnan mumbled. “Has your insanity come so far? Shouldn’t you be more careful than to parade yourself in a public house?”

“I have many friends here. None would turn me over to David.”

Sybilla had had enough. Donnan continued to cross words with this mysterious man, but Sybilla couldn’t follow a single bit of their discussion without more information. In desperation, she turned to the man on her other side—Fintan.

“What is going on?” she whispered, hoping he wasn’t mad enough to leave her in the dark over something clearly so important. “Who is he?”

Fintan frowned at her, but bent toward her to reply without interrupting Donnan. “Malcolm.” His warm breath brushed over her ears. “He’s been rebelling since David took the throne instead of him. He was imprisoned at Roxburgh, but ‘twould appear that’s no longer true.”

Sybilla’s mind raced. There’d been a commotion that morning when she was returning to the keep. Could Malcolm have escaped today?

Then her thoughts ran even further back. Months ago when her maid Lucy had stabbed her, the woman had uttered some nonsense about Malcolm while arguing with Ronan. *Malcolm is the true king of Scotland*. The memory flashed. In a moment she was returned to the fiery stables. *The usurper David*, Lucy had called him. Every word, every feeling from that night haunted her still. She doubted she’d ever forget it.

If Lucy was a supporter of Malcolm and she’d been acting on his orders, then...

Sybilla placed a hand on Fintan’s arm to get his attention back. “This is the man who burned Calder?”

Fintan nodded once, the strong line of his jaw clenching tightly.

“Seems to me that you don’t need much help,” Donnan’s voice broke her wandering thoughts. “You’ve managed to get this far.”

“I need the Highlands behind me.” Malcolm’s eyes lit up as he spoke. “David has the Lowlands now, but if I unite the clans behind me, I could reclaim my kingship.”

“Good luck convincing them to drop their feuds in favor of yours,” Donnan said wryly.

Malcolm smiled wickedly. “Many already have. Will you be among them?”

Donnan nearly choked on his own laughter. “You’re not seriously asking me to join you?” He looked askance at Jennet. “You burned my kinsman’s village to the ground.”

“You will have this one chance to side with the winning force.” Malcolm shook with conviction as he spoke. “I won’t offer again.”

“You won’t need to.” Donnan stood.

“Mark my words, Drummond,” Malcolm’s honeyed tone belied the meaning of his words, “you have no idea what you’ve begun. I have forces beyond your ken. You and your kinsmen won’t be a problem for long.”

Donnan and Jennet led their small group in a hasty exit. Farewells and final words were apparently unnecessary. They were several feet from the table by the time Sybilla was out of her chair.

Her stomach rumbled with hunger. She hesitated a moment, looking between her hot meal and her companions.

“Come on, Sybilla.” Fintan’s words felt as sharp as a blade in spite of his whisper-soft voice. He grabbed her elbow, pulling her behind him back outside again.

“Twould appear she’d not be having supper after all.

By the time the bells for compline echoed over the rolling landscape, they had settled into a makeshift camp in the forest outside of Edynburg. They’d shared a meal of oatcakes and hard cheese, and Jennet, Isobel, and Ismay had promptly fallen into a deep sleep. Donnan moved a short distance away, keeping watch. Fintan was bent over a project near the fire, whittling a small block of wood.

Sybilla sat upon her cloak before the crackling fire, ruminating on her day. Wet leaves covered the forest floor, crunching and squishing like a poorly made pie. Occasionally, when she shifted just right, cold mud oozed out from beneath them, dirtying her fine riding cloak.

She watched Fintan work the wood for a time. His knife chipped away at the block in small, controlled movements. She couldn’t decide if the nature of the work made him *seem* frustrated, or if he was, in fact, taking out his anger on his project.

Deciding to prod him into conversation rather than sit by wondering if he’d ever speak with her again, Sybilla moved her cloak across the soggy leaves until she was right beside Fintan.

“So,” she nodded toward his woodworking project, “what are

you doing?"

He ignored her.

"A mystery, then." Sybilla leaned forward to inspect his work more closely. "Let's see if I can guess."

As far as she could tell, he was making some sort of disc or circle. He had carefully rounded the wood, and was doing something to the middle of it. Hollowing it out, mayhap?

"Is it a bracelet?"

Silence.

"How about a brooch?"

Silence.

"Some sort of cloak fastener?"

"Do you only think of jewelry, lass?" He still wasn't looking at her, but 'twas better than his stubborn silence.

"'Tis my father's doing," Sybilla replied flatly.

"Aye, I'm sure 'tis."

"Is it the sun?" she asked sarcastically. She wasn't doing the best job of making him less cross with her.

He set down his project in a huff, turning to face her. " 'Tis a ring."

"It, um," Sybilla searched for a way to answer him delicately, "'tis quite large for a ring, isn't it?"

" 'Tis a *teething* ring."

"You have a baby?" Sybilla couldn't conceal the shock in her voice.

Fintan inspected the wooden ring, turning it over in his hands and smiling to himself. "My baby brother, Lochlann," he said softly. "The wee lad won't stop wailing. Keeps the whole house awake."

"I hope that it helps," Sybilla replied. "I've not had the pleasure of that experience yet, but my maid—before Lucy—had a grandchild teething. She and her daughter were both exhausted through it."

Fintan raised an eyebrow. "You've not been around any bairns?"

"Thanks to my father, I've not been around much at all."

"Might your carefully guarded resentment have anything to do with stealing away in a cart?" The corners of his mouth lifted

playfully.

Sybilla knew he only partly jested, though. “Aye, you’re right. I should speak better of him,” she admitted. “And I’m sorry for making such trouble for you. ‘Tis the truth I just wanted to get beyond his reach for a while.”

“You’ve lived a bit of a sheltered life, from what I can see,” he observed carefully, “‘twould be difficult to make a plan with such limited knowledge.”

Sybilla looked into his cerulean blue eyes, filled with understanding. “I’m not sure that I’ve lived at all.”

Chapter Nine



February 24, 1137
Near Edynburg, Scotland

Sybilla needed to make a decision, and quickly. After breaking camp, they planned to ride to the south, back toward Roxburgh and her father's cloying grasp.

She wasn't a fool. Sybilla realized she'd end up back with him eventually. But before that happened, she was determined to have a true adventure. For when she did finally return, he'd surely lock her up for the rest of her days.

Sybilla had given quite a bit of thought to her predicament since last evening. She'd considered sneaking away in the night, but Fintan and Donnan watched her like a troublesome child, waiting for her to get into mischief. She'd not have made it far.

She had also briefly contemplated trying to steal one of the horses and make a run for the forest. Once she was on a horse, that would surely have worked. The problem, however, was that she'd never have made it near one of the horses without someone getting suspicious.

In the end, Sybilla decided that her only course of action was to somehow convince Fintan not to take her back to Roxburgh. They'd been friends, or at the very least acquaintances, not that long ago. Aside from her sneaking onto the cart, he'd always been sympathetic to her. Sybilla thought she might be able to get him on her side before 'twas too late.

An eerie calm floated in the morning air as Sybilla packed up her blanket and donned her cloak. They'd found a sheltered glade in the woods outside of Edynburg, surrounded by oak and ash trees. As she fell asleep last night beneath their boughs, she'd listened to the sweet songs of birds. But now 'twas oddly quiet. Before she could think on it further, Fintan rode over to her on his destrier.

"Are you ready, lass?" he growled at her.

Sybilla held her tongue against the sharp retort that came to mind. "Of course," she replied sweetly, batting her lashes at him. She

hadn't come all this way only to end up going straight back, and she'd need to be in his good graces to convince him to help.

He just sat there, waiting expectantly for Lord knew what.

Assuming he wanted her to get moving, Sybilla took a few steps nearer to the rest of the group.

Fintan nudged his horse toward her. "You're riding with me."

"What? Why?" Sybilla stopped walking, looking from the others mounting their own horses back to Fintan.

"As I recall," he answered slowly, his chiseled jaw tightening attractively, "you got here on our supply cart. We haven't a spare horse for you, and I don't trust you to be on your own even if we did. So, you're riding with me."

For a brief moment, Sybilla thought to argue. But she quickly realized her best bet at having a serious conversation with Fintan was to ride with him. So instead of a tart reply, she made her best effort at meekly walking over to his horse. She hadn't much practice at meekness, but she thought she made a pretty good show of it.

Fintan leaned down, clearly thinking he'd be grabbing her by the waist and hauling her up onto the horse in an unseemly manner.

Sybilla pushed aside his reaching arm. 'Twas a large horse, far bigger than her gentle palfrey. And she'd nothing to use as a mounting block. Nevertheless, Sybilla was undaunted. Placing her foot upon his, she grabbed the pommel and pushed herself up with her legs, squishing his foot a wee bit in the process.

As she reached the top, Fintan's hands grasped her waist, helping her into the saddle before him. She slipped her leg beneath her so she was seated astride, congratulating herself on her impressive mount.

Fintan didn't say a word about her accomplishment, instead pulling her firmly against his hard chest.

Once again, she bit her lip to keep from commenting on his brutish behavior in a situation she clearly had in hand. Instead she turned around, once more batting her lashes at him sweetly. "Well, won't this be nice," she whispered, looking into his pale blue eyes.

Lord, he had gorgeous eyes. For a brief moment, she recalled being in his arms, surrounded by fire and smoke, wondering what

color eyes her guardian angel had as he carried her to safety. Blue, like the summer sky, as it turned out.

With an indignant grunt, he pulled the horse in a tight half-circle, then dug in his heels.

Before Sybilla could say another word, they were headed back toward Roxburgh.

They continued down the misty road at a snail's pace. The air was warming, but the ground held tight to winter's chill. The thin mist faded by the moment as the sun broke the tree line before them. Donnan rode in the lead with the pack horse, followed by Ismay, Isobel and Jennet. Sybilla and Fintan brought up the rear.

Sybilla knew she shouldn't enjoy sitting so close to Fintan, yet her mind kept wandering to the warmth of his body, the strength emanating from his arms and chest, the feeling of closeness she got when her legs brushed against his. How many times since that night in autumn had she imagined being back in his arms? Heat flooded her cheeks just thinking about it.

Shaking such nonsense from her head, Sybilla brought her focus back to her current dilemma. There were so many reasons Fintan wasn't for her. He was a common warrior, and she was a noble. He was Scottish, she was English. The single most important reason her fascination with Fintan could go no further was simple, however. More than she needed to escape her father, Sybilla needed to prove to herself that she could do more than live a life of leisure. She needed to have an adventure in order to see what she could really do. She very much doubted Fintan would be amenable to such a notion, which meant she needed to forget about his hard chest and focus on her plan.

"So do you often carve trinkets for your siblings?" Sybilla ventured, attempting to draw him into a comfortable conversation.

"You seem awfully interested in my woodcarving."

Without seeing his face, she couldn't gauge his mood. She shifted her weight so that she could turn more easily to look at him while they spoke.

He frowned at her. "And just what do you imagine you're

doing?"

"I'm simply trying to learn more about you."

"Why?" He tore his gaze off the horizon to pierce her with those blue eyes. "What are you playing at?"

Tossing her long braid over her shoulder dramatically, Sybilla leaned closer to him. Her head nearly rested upon his shoulder. "Why does it have to be a game?"

"I've not known you that long, lass, but it seems to me most everything is a game to you."

Sybilla chose to ignore that jibe. "You've not known me that long," she repeated slowly, "yet you call me 'lass' instead of 'lady'."

"My apologies," he said softly. "I believe I got in the habit when you were in Calder. If it bothers you, I will use your title."

"I like it when you call me 'lass'," she whispered, craning her neck so that her lips brushed against his ear.

He stiffened instantly, turning his head toward her. His nose nearly touched hers. "Fine, *lass*," his words fell against her skin, "I still think you're up to something."

"Is it something you don't like?"

The corner of his mouth cracked into half a grin, and mischief lit his eyes. "I haven't decided."

Sybilla brushed her finger over his chest in what she hoped was a seductive manner and leaned her head upon his shoulder.

His lips moved to her forehead, resting there, somewhere between a kiss and a whisper.

"You know," she began, carefully choosing her words. "You could always take me back to Calder with you."

She felt his soft lips curve into a smile on her forehead.

"Would that you'd be so lucky," he murmured, pulling away. "But 'twas a good effort."

Sybilla looked up at him. She'd been trying to lure him into agreeing with her, but somehow she'd ended up wishing he would kiss her. She would have to be careful using that tactic in the future. The absence of his touch left her cold enough to shiver.

"Please take me with you." She hated that her voice cracked at

her plea.

“I’m sorry, lass. You’ll be back with your father tonight.”

Knowing full well her ploy had failed thus far, Sybilla still couldn’t quite bring herself to take her head off his shoulder. He was warm and strong and smelled like earth and leather. ‘Twas an intoxicating combination.

Fintan didn’t seem to mind. He even shifted his arm to hold her more tightly against him.

Just as Sybilla was settling in to decide on her next tactic, she thought she heard an odd scratching sound far off in the distance. All her senses went on the alert.

Sybilla rode the woods and hills alone every single day, and had learned to keep keen eyes and sharp ears at the ready. Though she wanted an adventure, being accosted alone in the woods was not her idea of a good time. She had also learned that her horse was one of the best indicators of true danger.

Fintan’s destrier turned its ears in the direction Sybilla had heard the sound. When another noise came from the same place, the horse turned its head to look into the forest.

Sybilla glanced up at Fintan, who hadn’t noticed anything. Or, if he had, he wasn’t showing it. His eyes were pinned to the road before them.

Donnan, too, still looked forward. He hadn’t called them to a halt, as Sybilla might have expected.

“Fintan.” Sybilla hushed her voice so as not to alarm anyone else.

He looked down at her, their noses nearly touching again.

“We need to go that way,” she told him, pointing in the direction of the sound.

He rolled his eyes. “Sybilla, you *just* tried to get me to turn around. Shouldn’t you at least wait a while before you have another go of it?”

She straightened, finally lifting her head off his shoulder. “No,” she said firmly, “‘tis not about me. There’s something in the woods over there.”

He quieted, listening and watching for several long moments. “I don’t hear anything.”

“‘Tis a low rumbling, almost like thunder. Every now and then I hear a scratching sound.”

Fintan sighed. “Look, lass. ‘Tis your best bluff yet, but I’m not going to ride off into the woods to investigate some imaginary sound. I don’t know what you’re planning, but I know it won’t end well for me.”

“‘Tis not imaginary!”

Everyone in front turned around at her raised voice. Donnan gave Fintan a questioning look, and Fintan shook his head.

“Fine,” Sybilla ground out, turning to seat herself properly in the saddle. “I’ll just have to show you.”

She ran her hands over the destrier’s neck, smoothing its mane and giving it a good scratch. Then she started gently rubbing its ears. Some horses hated it, others loved it. As luck would have it, Fintan’s horse *loved* it. She kept one hand scratching his ear, and grabbed his mane in the other.

“What are you doing?” Fintan hissed.

“Stealing your horse.” With a well-placed nudge and a tug on his mane, Sybilla convinced the destrier to turn into the forest.

Fintan tried changing course with the reins, but Sybilla had won the horse over. He grumbled over it, but eventually resigned himself to seeing what she was up to.

“You’re not going to stop me?”

“Apparently not.”

Normally, Sybilla would’ve ridden triumphantly into the forest, having taken the situation in hand. But as she grabbed the reins from his hands, gave the horse a well-deserved rub, and led them quietly into the trees, Sybilla realized that she hadn’t taken anything in hand. Unlike her father, who’d denied her every request, Fintan had quite literally handed her the reins.

Chapter Ten



Unbelievable. Fintan couldn't decide if he was more angry or amused at Sybilla's ill-conceived attempt to escape. Exactly what was her plan? To ride into the woods and push him off his own horse? He nearly chuckled aloud at the thought of her trying to unhorse him.

Before they disappeared into the tree line, he turned to motion to Donnan that they'd be right back. After traveling together for weeks, he and Donnan had an easy system of hand signals for times when even a whisper was too loud.

Poor Donnan looked as confused as Fintan felt. How had he managed to believe for even one moment that Sybilla was interested in him? He knew she'd try to convince him not to return her to Roxburgh. Aye, he'd counted on her putting up some sort of resistance. But what he'd not planned was enjoying the feel of her head on his shoulder, the feather-light brush of her hand on his chest. His unexpected reaction to her had distracted him. And now she was dragging him into the woods.

He could have stopped her, but decided 'twas best to let her see her plan through, to let her see her plan *fail*. Then, mayhap, she'd finally accept her fate.

The trees creaked and swayed in a chilly wind. The fog that had settled along the forest floor slowly dissipated, swirling like a pit of snakes about the horse's hooves. Sybilla's warm body pressed against his chest made the blustery morning far more bearable, but he knew 'twas a comfort he shouldn't get used to having.

Sybilla guided his horse confidently through the dense underbrush. Though winter had begun releasing the land from its icy grasp, the world was only beginning to wake. Veins of green, brown, and gray blended into a vista of earliest spring.

Fintan recognized the beauty of the forest which surrounded him, but 'twas not the landscape that captured his full attention. In spite of himself, his awareness returned again and again to the beauty sitting nearly in his lap.

He should keep an eye out for danger.

He should take the reins from Sybilla and return to the road.

He shouldn't want to reach out and pull her closer.

Fintan swallowed hard. Mayhap he could teach the lass a different sort of lesson. His hand slid down her arm until he could wrap her hands in his. He pulled the horse's reins, stopping them from wandering deeper into the trees. He'd just tempt her a little, enough to keep her from trying to trick him in the future.

She'd tried teasing him into distraction. 'Twas only fair to do the same to her.

He leaned forward, whispering softly next to her ear. "Sybilla?"

Fintan heard her breath catch when he spoke. She straightened in front of him, turning slowly to face him. The flecks of gold in her chestnut eyes shimmered in the filtered sunlight, but she didn't look him in the eye. Nay, the bold lass was staring at his lips.

He waited only a moment, giving her the opportunity to turn away, before he brought his lips to hers.

Instead of retreating, Sybilla grabbed the back of his neck to pull him toward her, deepening the gentle kiss. Her soft, full lips caressed his own, drawing him into her, luring him with their sweet taste, until he forgot everything except the feel of her against him.

Fintan's heart slammed against his chest, a hammer against the anvil. He hadn't really believed she'd kiss him back. Noble ladies teased often, but they rarely acted.

He'd meant to kiss her tenderly, simply, briefly. To tempt her more than take her. But Fintan had not counted on Sybilla doing the taking.

Her hands dropped from his hair, caressing his shoulders as she let out a soft moan.

Desire flooded him, crashing over him like a wave against the shore. He felt himself harden at her touch, drinking in the honey-sweet taste of her kiss.

With every shared breath, the weight of Fintan's responsibilities lightened. For the briefest moment, he forgot that five small people relied on him every single day. He forgot that his parents had died

and left him more than he could handle by himself.

He forgot that he was alone.

All he knew was that moment—Sybilla's demanding kiss, the curve of her hips beneath his hands, the faint scent of lavender that surrounded her.

Then he heard it.

The unmistakable clang of steel. The hushed murmur of hundreds of footsteps. The sound of an army on the move.

Pulling his lips from hers, Fintan quickly surveyed the forest before him. No sign of movement.

"You finally heard it, then?" Sybilla's sultry voice rang with vindication.

Fintan's mind still struggled to accept his sudden realization. "You weren't jesting?" he asked the temptress before him. "You didn't just lure me out here to escape?"

"*Lure* you? I took control of your horse and *brought* you here." She gestured widely in the direction of the sounds they yet heard. "To *save* you." Her words dripped with irritation, even while her lips still swelled from his kiss.

Fighting his confusion, Fintan dismounted and stalked slowly toward the sound of the army.

To his horror, Sybilla followed.

"What are you doing, lass?" He had to stop himself from shouting at her.

She leveled him a look, daring him to make her return to the horse. "I'm having an adventure," she replied coolly, "if you'd stop making a muck of it."

He should have done just that and moved her bodily back to the horse. It wasn't safe by any stretch of the imagination. She was a gentle lady, born and bred for fine embroidery, not sneaking up on an army. Fintan couldn't quite determine why he let her walk beside him, but he had to grudgingly admit 'twas nice to have a companion.

They covered the distance in no time. Past waking trees and thorny brush, they came to an overlook. Unexpectedly, the forest gave way to an old road in a sore state of disrepair. Marching slowly down

it was the largest army Fintan had ever seen in the flesh. Hundreds of soldiers, maybe more.

“‘Tis an old Roman road,” he observed aloud, so quietly he wasn’t certain Sybilla even heard him.

“Who are they?”

Fintan had wondered the same himself. He searched the ranks for some sign of allegiance. The men weren’t heavily armored, and most dressed as Highlanders. But Fintan had never seen so many warriors in one, or even two clans. There had to be men from five or more clans marching before him. Why?

“Is that...” Sybilla paused, as though reconsidering her question.

Fintan followed her gaze. A hollow feeling landed like a punch in his gut. “‘Tis Malcolm,” he said. “They’re rebels against David.”

“Why are they here?” she asked. “To escort him home?”

“Malcolm’s father held court in Stirling,” Fintan answered. “If he’s looking to hide from David, I’d have thought he’d head there or for Inverness.”

“Well that’s all north of here, isn’t it?”

Fintan looked askance at the beautiful lass. “Aye,” he said slowly, as though explaining it to one of his siblings, “but Inverness and Stirling lie northwest. Malcolm’s army goes northeast.”

Sybilla’s face hardened, as though she knew the answer before she asked her final question. “And what lies northeast?”

“Calder.”

Chapter Eleven



Pushing his confusing feelings regarding a certain kiss aside, Fintan didn't waste time getting Sybilla as far from Malcolm's formidable army as possible. He hurried his horse through the forest. When they returned to the road, they were greeted by looks of curiosity from their companions. Jennet and Donnan whispered quietly, their horses side-by-side. Jennet's daughter Isobel, a young lass of an age with Morna, waited beside Ismay.

Before Fintan could say a word about the army, Donnan started in on Sybilla.

"God's bones, lass!" he shouted at her, "What are you thinking? You can't just head off into the woods whenever you feel like it! And you," he turned toward Fintan, "you know better than taking a noblewoman off alone. You'll see her ruined."

Fintan felt his heartbeat pick up at Donnan's words—and the memory of that kiss—followed quickly by anger. How dare he speak so to Sybilla? "Are you quite finished?" he asked tightly. When Donnan didn't answer, he continued. "Malcolm's army is not a mile from here, and if you don't quit your bellyaching, they'll be marching straight to us."

Donnan's expression changed from anger to surprise. "Malcolm's what?"

"You heard me."

"Headed south?" Jennet, Donnan's aunt, spoke up. She had been the lady of Clan MacMaster for decades, until her son's recent marriage. Jennet knew a great deal about the politics of the Highland clans.

Fintan shook his head. "Northeast."

Frantic silence filled the space between them, as each traveler in turn reached the same conclusion. Everyone knew Malcolm could have only one motive in marching northeast—to attack Calder.

"Mayhap he's only going into hiding." Donnan broke the silence first.

Jennet frowned at him. "If he's only hiding, why does he need an army?"

Fintan was about to give his own opinion, when Ismay chimed in unexpectedly.

"Malcolm is planning to attack Calder," she stated confidently. Everyone turned to her in shock.

Fintan wasn't terribly surprised. The lass was the daughter of a spy, after all, and she clearly paid attention. That she had some knowledge of the matter made sense to him. "What makes you so sure, my lady?"

"Gillian told me," she replied.

"You saw Gillian?" Jennet's pained words made it clear none of the other women had seen her.

"Who's Gillian?" Sybilla asked innocently.

"What did she say?" Donnan's commanding voice carried enough weight to win priority in the litany of questions.

"She tried to convince me to help her, and I waited a while to refuse. By then, she'd mentioned that Malcolm was planning to reclaim his place as king of the Highlands by waging war on those who oppose him. It sounded like he'd already managed to unite several clans to support him and help him escape."

"Did she mention Clan Calder?" Donnan pressed.

"Oh, aye. She held a strong dislike for them. Spoke ill of them often. It seemed a bit of a sore spot for her. She remarked once that she was glad she'd be able to finally see justice done to Laird Calder, and that Malcolm agreed they should be dealt with first."

Fintan felt Sybilla wiggle in the saddle in front of him, reigniting the desire he had just managed to overcome.

"Who is this Gillian?" she repeated her question impatiently.

At long last Isobel, Jennet's daughter, spoke. "She was my brother's wife."

"Handfasted," Jennet bristled. "They were never married properly."

"She left him to follow Malcolm," Donnan explained, barely controlling his anger. "He's lucky to be rid of her."

“I see,” Sybilla intoned. “And how do you know ‘twas the same Gillian?” she asked, turning to Ismay.

Ismay’s lips formed a self-satisfied smile. “I acquired a few skills from my father before I learned to hate him.”

Donnan cleared his throat, interrupting the straying conversation. “We can discuss traitors and spies later. Right now, we need a plan.”

“We need to return to Calder as soon as possible and warn them,” Jennet said.

Of course that had been Fintan’s first instinct as well. But since his initial discovery of the army, he had done a few quick calculations. He’d only come up with one solution. “We have to stray off course and destroy the supply line.”

Donnan laughed for a moment, sobering quickly when he realized Fintan was serious. “‘Tis only you and I,” he protested, “and what of the women? How will we keep them safe on such a reckless endeavor?”

“We can’t get back to Calder more than a day or two before the army if they’re well-supplied,” Fintan explained, “If we interrupt their line, we’ll slow them down and buy time for Ronan to set up a defense.”

“We could reach Calder in time, surely,” Sybilla agreed. “Couldn’t a small group on horseback out-run an army weighed down and marching on foot?”

“I wish it were so, lass,” Fintan answered softly. He drank in the scent of lavender that surrounded her, wishing he could take her in his arms again. Remembering the taste of her on his lips.

“Lady,” Donnan grumbled.

“Yes?” Sybilla looked at him questioningly.

“Fintan should address you as ‘lady’ instead of ‘lass’ as you’re of noble birth and higher rank.”

Fintan narrowed his eyes at Donnan, who suddenly seemed overly interested in Fintan’s interactions with Sybilla, and awfully disagreeable for a man who’d suggested just last night that Fintan bed her.

“Fintan is a friend of our family, and as such I have given him express permission to drop my honorific.”

He couldn’t see the expression on her face, as she was seated with her back against him, but judging by the venom in her voice he’d wager she was furious over Donnan’s prying.

“As I was saying,” Fintan continued, choosing to ignore the entire exchange, “We have a cart of supplies and a horse carrying two, not to mention that two of our riders have only journeyed so far overland once before. If it were only Donnan and I, mayhap we’d make it to Calder before Malcolm.

“But even if we did, Ronan’s warriors wouldn’t be enough to stand against such a force. He’d need to assemble all three clans—Calder, MacMaster, and Drummond—to have any hope of holding his ground. And *that* would take far more time than we have at present.”

“And what of the women?” Donnan’s eyes brimmed with anger and frustration.

Fintan shrugged. “Well I don’t think they should come with us on the raids. But with only two we’ll be stealthier.”

“I don’t like it one bit,” Jennet said sternly, “but I don’t see any other way.”

“We don’t have time to toss about too many more ideas,” Ismay interjected. “The army is still moving, and we aren’t.”

“I don’t suppose Gillian told you anything about the army’s supply line,” Donnan remarked.

“Not exactly, but she did mention that Clan MacCready was one of the first to ally with them. I know their lands are also northeast of here.”

Fintan looked to Donnan. “If MacCready is helping, they’ll be supplying from Banff,” he said in a hushed tone.

Donnan nodded his agreement. “Aye, and the nearest town along that line is Dundee.”

“Dundee it is,” Jennet agreed, clicking softly to her palfrey. “We’d best get moving or we’ll miss our chance.”

Fintan picked up the reins, urging his own destrier down the road at a canter. If they made good time, they’d be able to catch the

next load of supplies for Malcolm's army. A force of such magnitude would need frequent resupplying or they'd quickly fall into disorder. If he and Donnan were able to make a dent in the line, Malcolm would have to let his men pillage and hunt as they went, and even then morale would slowly decline. Aye, 'twas a good plan, but risky.

What would Sybilla do while they went after the wagons? Where could she hide that would be safe from the army as well as their raid? And, his most unexpected concern of all, would she worry over him?

Fintan desperately tried to keep his mind on the problems at hand. He needed to be focused to make an effective effort against Malcolm. If he wanted to help his laird, he'd have to stop letting his emotions get the better of his thoughts.

It would be easier if the object of his deliberations wasn't resting sweetly in his arms. He took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of lavender just one more time, then he'd force himself to focus.

Fintan couldn't quite decide why he was suddenly so fascinated with Sybilla. He'd met her months ago, and though he'd certainly appreciated her beauty, he'd never been tempted as he was now. Likely the kiss was to blame. 'Twas only natural to desire someone who kissed you. And he had to admit that he'd begun to enjoy her company, even if she was constantly trying to trick him. Aye, 'twas definitely that.

Satisfied with his conclusion, Fintan's mind began plotting all the ways in which they might interfere with the army's supplies. Yet every once in a while, the wind picked up and the scent of lavender strayed into his thoughts again.

Chapter Twelve



February 26, 1137
Outside Dundee, Scotland

Sybilla could feel the heat rushing up the back of her neck and flooding her cheeks. She silently thanked the Lord that Fintan was behind her and couldn't see the ridiculous effect he was having on her. It wasn't as though she'd never teased a man before. Aye, she'd even kissed a guard once. But she'd never felt quite like that before. Her stomach filled with flutters, like hundreds of butterfly wings, as she remembered the feel of his soft lips pressed against hers.

Riding in front of him on the beauty of a destrier was proving far more trying than she'd expected. Of course she'd dreamed of him since his heroic rescue that night so many months ago. But Sybilla was still shocked at the force of her reaction to him. The heat from his body radiated like the sun itself, keeping her more than warm enough in the chilly spring air. She could feel the ripple of his muscles beneath his linen shirt, tensing as the horse soared over the road.

Sybilla reveled in this new turn in her life. She had done it. She'd escaped from her father, and by God she was having a real adventure! Here she was, in the arms of a handsome Highland warrior—who had *kissed* her, no less—on their way to sabotage an army of rebels. Honestly, she couldn't have dreamed anything so deliciously scandalous if she'd tried. And, best of all, Sybilla was fairly certain they wouldn't be taking her back to her father any time soon.

Near evening, they started passing small farmsteads on the road just outside Dundee. As the keep came into view a league or so beyond them, a line of carts laden with goods and covered with woolen blankets approached them, heading toward Edynburg.

Fintan's hot whisper in her ear drew her full attention. "Not a word, lass. Let Donnan do the talking."

Sybilla nodded gently. Normally, she would bristle at being ordered about. But this was a matter well beyond her ken and she knew it. She watched as Donnan hailed the men driving the first cart.

"That's quite a load you've got there," he called cheerfully.

A wiry, bearded man drove the cart and appeared to be the one in charge. He replied just out of her hearing, and Donnan rode over to speak with him.

Sybilla couldn't catch the rest of the conversation. They seemed to be getting on well, and both men were smiling, but she wondered how much Donnan could really discover just by having a friendly conversation with the man. It wasn't long before Donnan motioned for them to follow him off the road to make space for the carts to pass.

Fintan hurried the destrier to wait next to Donnan, but said nothing.

Six wagons, full to bursting with foodstuffs, ambled along the muddy road. When the last one was a ways off, Donnan led them further into the forest.

They rode until they found a small clearing, maybe a mile or two away from the road. The sun had warmed the land considerably over the course of the day, and the trees around them reached proudly toward its last rays.

Donnan dismounted, and everyone else did the same.

Fintan slid off the destrier and held his hand out to her with a soft smile.

Sybilla thought for the briefest moment that she'd prefer no help at all, but that grin on his face melted all her resistance. She put her hand in his, slipping down the horse's side until she stood inches away from Fintan. The flutters returned to her stomach, forcing her to take a step back and regain her composure.

"We'll make camp here," Donnan announced quietly.

"So those were the supplies for the army?" Sybilla asked. Was she the only one confused by all this?

"I think so," Donnan replied. He helped the other women tie up the horses and unpack them before striding over to where she and Fintan were doing the same. "We'll need to make sure before we do anything. I don't want to burn supplies intended for any of our allies."

Fintan nodded. "We should go soon or we might miss them."

"Jennet," Donnan called, "make sure everyone stays here until we return. One of you must stay awake, even into the night. If we

aren't back by morning, return to Roxburgh and tell David."

Moments later, he was on his way to mount up once more.

Then Fintan turned to her, his lips parted slightly.

Sybilla's stomach fell to flutters, a rush of excitement rising in her chest. She thought he was about to say something to her. Mayhap profess his undying love and ask her for a token, just like a knight at the joust. Would he kiss her? In front of everyone? She took a tentative step toward him.

At the same moment, he turned away, pulling himself onto his destrier without a word.

Sybilla knew she was being foolish, playing the part of a silly girl. Yet she couldn't manage to stop herself. She watched despondently as the two men rode into the forest. The moment she lost sight of Fintan, she started praying for his safe return.



"What's the plan?"

They'd ridden quickly through the forest, dismounting and continuing on foot once they were within sight of the supply caravan. They'd been stalking the slow-moving wagons for a good quarter hour before Fintan finally couldn't keep his curiosity to himself.

"I'm fairly certain the wagons are intended for Malcolm," Donnan whispered, "but I need to be absolutely sure."

Fintan rolled his eyes. "That's not a plan."

"I can't decide between bribing them and nabbing a man."

Fintan considered the options. If they tried to bribe them and it went poorly, their plan would be exposed and they could possibly be followed. 'Twould endanger the women and hinder their chances of success. 'Twas too risky.

"We should nab one once they make camp," Fintan suggested. "'Tis nearly full dark now. We won't have to wait long."

Donnan nodded his agreement. They waited silently, following the group until the sun had been gone so long that its warmth was all but forgotten.

When at long last one of the men strayed from camp, presumably to relieve himself, Fintan and Donnan grabbed him.

Fintan hauled him, one hand on the man's mouth and the other on his own dagger, until they were a good distance from the camp.

"We won't hurt you," Donnan growled at him, "if you cooperate. No shouting. Answer our questions. We'll leave you here with no harm done. Do you agree?"

The poor bastard nodded frantically.

Fintan could feel the man's heart racing, his breathing came in nervous gasps. Good. The more scared he was, the easier this would be on everyone. He slowly removed his hand from the man's mouth so he could answer Donnan's questions.

"Who are you?" The man's voice quivered as much as his body.

Donnan ignored his question. "Where are you taking those supplies?"

"I-I-I don't know, exactly."

"I doubt that's true." Donnan took a menacing step toward the man.

"We're to travel toward Edynburg until we find the army." The words rushed out like water from a broken dam. "I don't know where they are."

Donnan smiled. "Malcolm's army?"

The man glanced behind him at Fintan, then looked back to Donnan.

He nodded again.

"Perfect."



Sybilla paced a circle around their meager campsite. The sun had set hours ago, and the bells of Dundee had long since rung the hour of compline, ending the day. Surely it couldn't take so very long? Wasn't this the sort of business that was ruthlessly quick and decisive? What if something had happened to them? What if things went wrong? What if Fintan was injured and couldn't get back to them?

"Sybilla, you're going to kill every plant in this entire clearing if you don't stop your sulking," Ismay teased.

"Sulking?" Sybilla knew Ismay was baiting her to distract her. Even so, it worked, as always. "I think you have me confused for

another English lady at this camp.”

Ismay snorted in amusement at her jibe. Isobel’s eyes widened as she watched the exchange. Likely she thought they were truly in disagreement. Jennet sat mending one of the woolen blankets that had torn on the journey.

Ismay stood and joined Sybilla on her path around the camp. “He’s going to be fine,” she said, low enough that the other two women couldn’t hear her.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“What happened when you rode into the woods? You were gone an awfully long time.” Ismay raised an eyebrow knowingly.

Sybilla sighed, giving up her ruse. “Fine,” she replied tersely. “He kissed me.”

Ismay’s squeal of delight drew the attention of Jennet and Isobel, but neither commented on it.

“He didn’t!”

“He most certainly did!” Sybilla bristled. “And truth be told, I rather enjoyed it.”

Ismay smacked her on the arm. “Sybilla! You know you can’t *actually* be with him, right?”

A sinking feeling brought Sybilla’s excitement down in a crash. “I know,” she admitted, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t have any fun. ‘Tis my adventure, after all.”

Ismay regarded her, the same look she always gave Sybilla before saying something horribly insightful. “‘Tis,” she began slowly, “and you *should* enjoy it. But after your adventure, you know you’ll have to return to your actual life. Make a proper match and earn status or an alliance for your family. Your father would never let you marry a common-born Highlander, so be sure you don’t give your heart to one.”

Sybilla’s stomach soured at the thought of her father. ‘Twas true he’d never agree to her marrying Fintan. But she wasn’t here to get married. And she wasn’t planning to see him again anytime soon. Ismay’s warning did remind her, though, that if she followed Fintan to Calder she would have to face Ronan again. Would he try to return

her? Or would he let her stay, even after their broken engagement? Would Fintan want her to stay?

“But what about Taran?” Sybilla asked. “He’s a common-born Scottish soldier. Weren’t you planning to catch him?”

Ismay’s face fell. “I know I could never get approval for such a match. I love him, aye, and I believe he loves me. But I knew ‘twas fanciful from the start. And I don’t want your heart broken as well.”

Sybilla pulled her friend into a hug. How could she have forgotten that Ismay had a stake in their escape plan? She’d wanted to stay at Roxburgh and be with Taran. Now she was further from him every day, and unlikely to ever see him again. “I’m so sorry,” Sybilla whispered. “I know this isn’t easy for you.”

Before Ismay could reply, shouting echoed through the trees. Men cried out, screaming, yelling. It sounded frantic. And ‘twas coming from the direction of the wagons. From where Fintan was at that very moment.

Sybilla and Ismay hurried back to where Jennet and Isobel sat. By the time Sybilla had taken a seat on the woolen blanket next to them, the dim light of a fire flickered from afar. Wisps of grey smoke were just visible above the trees. Something had happened. Sybilla only prayed Fintan was safely on his way back.

Chapter Thirteen



“Get that one, too!” Donnan shouted above the cacophony they’d created. He was pointing his torch in the direction of the lead wagon, the only one not yet aflame.

Fintan sprinted toward it, knowing they needed to leave soon. If the wagon drivers realized there were only two men attacking them, someone might get the idea to fight back. Though Fintan knew he and Donnan were a skilled match, two against ten was never a fair fight.

He reached the wagon and threw his last torch onto it, lingering only long enough to be sure the wagon would burn. Turning to head back to Donnan, he caught the sound of hoofbeats coming from the direction of Edynburg. A new voice, deeper and more confident, called out to the men fleeing the wagons.

Fintan let out a low whistle, signaling to Donnan to come to him. They fell back into the tree line and watched as the rider approached, followed by nine more mounted warriors.

“Highlanders,” Donnan muttered. “Must be the guards Malcolm sent to accompany the wagons.”

“They appear to be a bit late,” Fintan added, grinning to himself.

“Aye, but they’ll be trouble later. We’d best get back.”

They hurried deeper into the cover of the forest before doubling back for their horses. They needed to be certain none of the newly-arrived contingent of Highland guards followed them back to the camp.

As they left the chaos behind them, Fintan felt as though he could fly. Their raid couldn’t have gone any better. They’d destroyed that load of supplies, causing a good deal of trouble for Malcolm and his rebel army. They’d even managed to cut loose most of the horses in the process.

“Makes you feel like you could do anything, doesn’t it?” Donnan commented just as they were reaching camp. “There’s nothing like a victory to lift the spirits.”

Fintan couldn’t agree more. His chest swelled as they arrived

back at the camp. Just when he thought he couldn't feel better, he caught sight of Sybilla.

Her rose lips were pursed, looking even fuller than usual. Her brows put creases on her delicate countenance. When he rode into sight she fair jumped to her feet, hurrying to where he and Donnan dismounted. For a moment she hesitated, just before she reached him. 'Twas written on her face and in the tension emanating from her body—she'd been worried about him.

Fintan closed the distance between them, forgetting entirely that 'twas inappropriate to greet her so. When he pulled her into his arms, he took a deep breath, reveling in that now-familiar smell of lavender that followed her wherever she went. The feel of her body pressed against his set his body alight with desire once more. If they had been alone, he'd have done a hell of a lot more than hug her.

The lass grasped him like she was falling from a cliff. With her face buried against his chest, he could feel the heat from every breath she took.

He could hold her forever, but Donnan was glowering at him now. Even Jenet's eyebrow was raised. He leaned down, whispering in her ear. "You'd best be hugging Donnan, too."

He heard her inhale slowly.

She stepped away from him, then turned and gave Donnan a far less enthusiastic embrace.

God help him, he felt a pang of jealousy seeing her in Donnan's arms. 'Twas ridiculous, as he'd been the one to send her there. It would help alleviate any suspicions of inappropriate familiarity between them. Of course, the whole thing was nonsense since they were simply old acquaintances. Friends, really.

Friends who had shared a single, stolen kiss.

"I'm so glad you're both safe," she said. "Thank goodness that's over."

"Over?" Donnan replied with a boastful laugh, "Nay, lass. That was but the beginning."

The following day they had made their way to the town of Stonehaven, where they awaited the next wagons. Fintan and Donnan

made quick work of them in the night.

The poor drivers didn't stand a chance, fleeing into the darkness. Donnan regaled the ladies with vivid tales of how they set fire to the wagons, just as before. They cut the horses loose, and managed to get away unseen before anyone was the wiser.

Two days after their first successful raid, they arrived at the town of Torraibh. 'Twas a larger settlement than Dundee or Stonehaven, and they'd need to be far more careful in their attack. They were nearing the borders of MacCready lands, and Torraibh was likely under heavy guard, particularly if the MacCready was using it to route supplies to his new ally.

Each time Fintan left, Sybilla paced the camp, fretting. She couldn't help herself. Aye, he'd managed to pull it off twice now, but what if something went wrong this time? When Donnan had explained the extent of their plan—to follow the supply chain as near to Banff as they could before it grew too dangerous—Sybilla protested. She couldn't imagine that continuing to put themselves in danger could truly be worth the risk. Hadn't they already set the army back a few days?

This time she was even more flustered. Before he'd left, Fintan had pulled her aside for a private conversation, still well within sight of the others yet out of earshot.

"Would you like a horse?"

"A horse?" Sybilla shook her head, hoping to shake out her confusion as well. "Why would I want a horse?"

Fintan smiled at her, his eyes softening.

Lord, she felt like a melting candle. If he didn't quit looking at her like that, she'd be a puddle on the ground before they reached Calder.

"So you can ride on your own," he explained gently.

"You'd trust me on my own mount?"

"No. But I think I could catch you."

She took a step closer to him, unable to resist the pull she felt, needing to be closer. "Oh?" she challenged, holding herself as straight and tall as she could manage. She wasn't used to men towering over

her quite as Fintan did. “Is that a challenge?”

“It might be,” he allowed with a wicked grin. “Do you want your own horse?”

She sensed the slightest hesitation in his voice, a note of uncertainty. “Do *you* want me on my own horse?” she asked, turning the question on him and praying she’d read his hesitation right.

Fintan leaned forward. He was so close she could feel every breath he took. Close enough to touch. Close enough to kiss. “Devil take me,” he whispered, his voice wavering for the first time since she’d met him. “I don’t.”

Her heart hammered. Butterflies filled her insides, reminding her of his kiss. “Then don’t bring me one.”

“Are you about ready, Fintan? We need to get going or we might miss them.” Donnan strode toward them, looking less than pleased. When he reached them, he lowered his voice so no one else heard his next words. “I don’t know what’s going on with you two, but if you keep this up we’re going to be in trouble for more than kidnapping.”

“I prefer ‘abduction’,” Sybilla shot back. “After all, I am neither a goat nor a child.” She turned away in a dramatic huff, frustrated that Donnan had interrupted them. Had Fintan been about to kiss her again? She’d never seen him look so—she searched a long moment for the right word. Vulnerable. He’d looked vulnerable.

The butterflies lingered, turning her stomach over itself as she recalled his last words. He didn’t want her to ride on her own horse. He liked her riding with him. Heaven help her, she liked it, too.

Chapter Fourteen



“What in God’s bones are you thinking?” Donnan had politely waited until they were far from the camp before laying into him over Sybilla.

Fintan had known it was coming. He could feel the tension building with Donnan each time he took a private moment with Sybilla. And Donnan wasn’t wrong, either. Fintan had absolutely no business getting friendly with a noblewoman. And an English one at that. Not to mention she’d once been betrothed to his laird. Aye, Donnan’s censure was right on the mark.

“I don’t believe I am,” Fintan answered gruffly. Donnan might be right, but he didn’t appreciate it one bit. And he certainly didn’t have to admit that to Donnan. The boastful bastard would never let him live down such an admission.

“You can’t wed her,” Donnan said, calming a bit. “Therefore, you can’t bed her.”

Fintan’s blood boiled at that. “I am *not* going to bed her,” he growled. “I’m just helping her feel more comfortable while we travel. And I don’t trust her not to try escaping again. Not that it’s any business of yours.”

Donnan reigned in his destrier abruptly. “Fintan, you are my friend. You know that. But your laird is my kinsman. ‘Tis absolutely his business when his tenants dally with English nobles, and as he isn’t here to see to it, it has become my business.”

“‘Tis nothing serious,” Fintan assured him. “I know my place.” The thought had occurred to him several times in the past days that he’d need to put an end to his growing connection to Sybilla. And with each new sunrise, the idea hurt a little more.

“When we reach Calder, she’ll be returning to her father,” Donnan continued. “And I mean to see her returned *intact*.”

Fintan’s ears rang as frustration and rage got the better of him. “I’m starting to feel insulted,” he answered angrily. “I told you nothing would come of it. That you don’t believe me makes me

wonder why you trust me next to you in battle.”

“I don’t think you’re lying to me. I think you’re lying to yourself.”

Before Fintan could reply, Donnan led them onward. ‘Twas full dark, but they could hear the voices of a group of men near the road. Fintan swallowed his frustration and tried to focus on the task at hand. The flickering light of a small campfire drew his attention.

Donnan spotted it as well. Dismounting and tying up their horses, they crept between the thick trees toward the light.

Fintan sensed they were in trouble long before anything went wrong.

Seated merrily about the little fire, they found a dozen men, none dressed as warriors. They ate, drank, and laughed as though they hadn’t a care in the world. Not a one of them shifted or let slip any sign that they’d noticed Fintan and Donnan. Still, something seemed off.

“We should move more slowly tonight,” he whispered to Donnan as they stalked silently to the wagons.

“We’re always careful,” Donnan hissed back. “And we’ve had nothing but success so far.”

“There’s an ill mood tonight.”

Donnan snorted. “That’s just you being touchy about your lady fair.”

Mayhap Donnan was right, Fintan grudgingly admitted. He pushed aside his doubts and took out the brands they’d brought to set the fires. They stopped several long paces from the carts, checking for any guards, before quickly lighting the brands.

The moment they were lit, the hairs stood on the back of Fintan’s neck.

Donnan, too, looked up, his eyes searching.

All at once, Fintan realized what had changed. “It’s silent.” He spoke as low as he could, hardly putting a voice to his moving lips. There was no more laughter or chatter coming from the fire. Even the night birds had ceased their songs. ‘Twas as quiet as a monastery.

Fintan and Donnan straightened at once. The very second they

moved, four men emerged from the trees, surrounding them. MacCready had his warriors delivering this load of supplies. The bastard must have gotten word of their previous raids.

Donnan let out an oath, charging the warrior blocking their exit.

Fintan followed him, covering his back as they fought for their retreat. Eight more men emerged from around the wagons, every one of them pursuing, as Fintan and Donnan made haste back into the forest.

They ran as far as possible from the place where they'd left the women, leading the MacCready warriors in the opposite direction. The trees were as sentinels, guarding their flight, offering places here and there for a brief respite.

As the sounds of pursuit magnified, Fintan's worries did as well. The noises following them came from far more than the dozen or so men they'd fled. Not long after they left the little fire behind, several others appeared, twinkling like stars beneath the trees. When they next chanced a pause to catch their breaths, Fintan pointed them out to Donnan.

"Aye." He nodded, whispering with a heavy breath. "I've seen them as well. I'm thinking the supply line ends here, and not at Banff."

"You mean *this* is where the army is headed?"

Donnan shrugged. "I think he means to attack us eventually. And it looks like he's massing his army here."

Cracks and shouts alerted them to more MacCready men, and without another word they continued their flight.

The bells for matins echoed from Dundee's bell tower when the MacCready warriors finally gave up their chase, halfway into the night. By that time, Fintan could hardly draw a full breath, and still they had to return to gather their horses and find the women.

"We've lost them," Donnan heaved, bending over to try to catch his breath.

Fintan did the same, looking around every few minutes to ensure they were truly alone now. "We need to head back." The words were a greater effort than he'd expected. "The women will be worried by

now.”

Donnan shook his head. “By the time we retrieve the horses ‘twill be nearly dawn. The women will have already turned toward Calder. We’ll make our way toward the road and meet them by midday.”

Fintan wanted to argue, but, for the third time that night Donnan was frustratingly correct.

After catching their breaths and taking a short rest, the pair of warriors set course to get back their mounts. The sun broke gloriously over the horizon as they walked, drenching the dark forest in molten orange light.

When Fintan noticed faint streaks of pinkish purple running across the sky, he was put in mind of a certain lass who smelled of lavender and tasted of honey. He was exhausted and frustrated by their defeat that night, but Sybilla would be mad with worry. At least Jennet and Ismay were there to talk some sense into her and keep her from doing anything foolish.



“We can’t just leave them!” Sybilla shouted in outrage. “What if they need our help?”

“If they haven’t returned by dawn, we are to head toward Calder,” Jennet repeated for the third time in as many minutes.

Ismay put a hand on Sybilla’s arm, giving her a supportive squeeze. “*This*,” she said, “this exact sort of scenario is why your father was so overbearing. Sometimes things happen to loved ones and there’s naught we can do but move on.”

“I refuse.”

“You might refuse to accept it, my lady, but that doesn’t make it less true.” Jennet’s words were stern, but her voice was kind. “Our best chance at seeing them again is to make our way to Calder. Donnan will know we’re doing just that. If we deviate from the plan, we’ll only cause more problems.”

Sybilla worried her bottom lip. She knew there was a bit of truth to Jennet’s argument. She also knew Jennet wasn’t about to back down and let her do anything other than ride along with them.

Jennet must have sensed her uncertainty. "If they need our help, finding them along the road is the best we can do. And trust me," she added sadly, "the last thing I want is to abandon my nephew."

He hadn't come back. Sybilla had sat up the entire night. He had always come back. As the interminable hours passed her by, Sybilla thought she must have fallen asleep and dreamt the whole thing. Surely come dawn she'd wake up to see Fintan's handsome, chiseled face, his sky blue eyes, his warm smile. He was always quick to smile at her.

But dawn came as it always does, and still there was no sign of Fintan. Ismay and Isobel woke once the sunbeams penetrated the thick forest. Jennet hadn't slept either. And Sybilla hadn't been dreaming. Her nightmare was very real.

A single tear escaped as she mounted a palfrey behind Ismay. 'Twas nothing compared with the ache she felt in her chest.

She heard sniffing, and found that Isobel, too, was fighting tears. Jennet was silent and straight-faced, leading them Lord knew where. Ismay patted Sybilla's arm every so often as the women made a sorrow-filled journey to the northeast.

The morning passed by in a blur of anguish. Sybilla couldn't stop seeing Fintan's face when she closed her eyes. She found herself wishing over and over for his warm, strong arms around her again.

Late in the morning, Jennet pulled her palfrey to a halt, raising her hand.

Sybilla had seen Donnan do the same countless times as they'd traveled. 'Twas the signal to stop and listen. In the forest to their left, riders approached, their horse's hooves beat out a steady rhythm. They were moving quickly for such a heavily wooded area.

"Should we hide?" Sybilla asked as quietly as she could.

"We haven't time." Jennet motioned in the direction of their supply cart. "They'd know someone was nearby, and we certainly couldn't outrun them."

"Speak for yourself," Sybilla mumbled. She had never lost a race, and she didn't see any reason for these two interlopers to be the exceptions.

Sybilla braced herself as the riders neared, her stomach dissolving into knots. What if it was the same men who had bested Donnan and Fintan? What if they'd been followed?

Ismay held the reins in a death grip.

Long before she was ready to face the intruders, they emerged from the tree line onto the road.

Relief washed over Sybilla. 'Twas Fintan and Donnan. She flew from Ismay's palfrey and ran to Fintan.

In one swift movement, he lifted her in front of him. He held his destrier back, letting everyone else fall into place behind Donnan. When no one else was looking, he placed his hand on her waist, pulling her against him so tightly that she could feel every inch of him like it was a part of herself.

Without a care for who might see, Sybilla spun around atop the horse, throwing her arms around his neck and doing everything in her power to keep from sobbing like a babe. "I was so worried," she whispered, her voice breaking.

Fintan cupped her face with his hand, tilting her chin up so she looked him in the eyes. "I'm not quite so easy to be rid of, lass." Then he unleashed that glorious grin, the one that warmed her like a bonfire in winter.

Instead of smiling back, her gaze fell longingly on his lips. She loved being in his arms again, but just the thought of him made her ache for his touch. The more time Sybilla spent with Fintan, the more she realized one kiss would never be enough.

The smile slipped from his face as he bit his bottom lip. His eyes darkened, his hungry gaze wandering down her body.

She leaned in, deciding she didn't care a whit if anyone saw them kiss.

Fintan put his hand between them. "We can't, lass."

"I don't care if they see," she pouted. "I want you."

He gently spun her around to face forward, his breathing heavy. His body felt like a wall of stone behind her, hard and smooth. "Being seen isn't the problem," he told her once they'd started toward the rest of their group.

“Then what is?”

His mouth found her neck, leaving one searing kiss after another—a trail of temptation along her burning skin from shoulder to ear. “I wouldn’t be able to stop.”

Sybilla collapsed against him. She believed him. She felt his restraint in the slow, measured movements he made. In the way he stilled her hips whenever she wiggled in front of him. In the hitch in his breath every time they touched.

Realizing she’d have to keep waiting for her next kiss, Sybilla settled against his broad, muscled shoulders. Back in his arms, she finally fell asleep, dreaming of what it would be like if he didn’t have to stop kissing her.

Chapter Fifteen



March 1, 1137
Calder, Scotland

Five days later they arrived back at Calder. Donnan had parted ways a few hours earlier, taking Jennet, Isobel, and Ismay to MacMaster Keep. He'd promised to come to Calder the next day with his brother, Laird Alec MacMaster, to discuss the impending battle with Malcolm.

Fintan and Sybilla rode across the breathtaking landscape as they made their way toward the keep. The last time Sybilla had undertaken this journey, she'd been coming to Calder to arrange a marriage to Ronan, now Laird Calder. He'd been handsome, of course, but the only reason she'd pushed so hard for the marriage was to get away from her father. A shiver coursed through her at the thought of facing Ronan after all that had happened last autumn.

And then there was Fintan.

Over the course of their journey, Sybilla had grown accustomed to spending all her time with Fintan. Would she see him at all once they arrived in Calder? Or would she be banished to the keep while he returned to his duties for the laird? Likely he'd be tied up dealing with the army marching toward them.

Fintan slowed the horse as they reached the bottom of a tall hill. If Sybilla recalled correctly, Calder lay just on the other side, past a stand of pine trees and a loch. His right hand dropped the reins, moving instead to rest on Sybilla's thigh in a most inappropriate manner.

She ought to be scandalized. Instead her stomach fluttered and tightened. It had been nearly a week since he'd kissed her in the forest. Would he dare to do it again before they returned? "I believe your grip is a bit loose on the reins," she teased.

"And how is it you know so much about horses?"

She could hear the smile in his voice without even looking at him. "'Twas the only excitement my father allowed," she answered truthfully. "My only adventure."

“You certainly seem determined to find trouble,” he said, his lips caressing her neck with each word, driving her mad.

“It seems to me you’re the one looking for trouble at the moment.” She did turn around then, wanting to see the look on his face when he replied.

The corners of his mouth lifted playfully. “‘Tis only trouble if we’re caught. Otherwise, ‘tis adventure.”

His lips captured hers, stealing the response right out of her, demanding far more than words.

Sybilla met his demands with her own, turning around completely so that her legs rested atop his, not a space left between them. She felt his need in every tender touch, every gasp, every moan. In a temptingly rigid part of him, pressed against her belly.

She wasn’t terribly experienced, but she wasn’t a fool either. Sybilla had heard plenty of women talk about their dalliances in delicious detail. And she knew from what she’d heard that the part of him she felt against her meant that he desired her just as much as she desired him.

Fintan’s hand slid up her waist until it rested just beneath her chest. He paused, giving her time to stop him, before he ran his fingers gently over the swell of her breast.

The butterflies in her stomach had long since evolved into a fire, burning hotter with each stroke of his fingers. She returned his attentions in kind, slipping her hand under his linen *léine* until she felt his smooth, taut skin beneath her fingers.

A growl in the back of his throat told her that he approved. He drank her in, consuming her completely. Sybilla had never felt so connected to anyone in her entire life. The way she felt when Fintan held her went far deeper than adventure or excitement. As he kissed her and caressed her he brought forth a side of Sybilla that even she hadn’t known existed.

Her hand ran down his chest, slowing as she reached his belly button yet continuing nonetheless. She needed more of him, and she knew where to find it.

His breath hitched when he realized what she was doing. But he

didn't stop her.

Sybilla's fingers brushed the top of him, hard and strained against the confines of his treads. An ache erupted between her own legs, sending shivers of desire through her.

He groaned, his forehead falling to her shoulder, his arousal leaning into her touch.

'Twas certainly not the adventure she'd had in mind, but Sybilla had never felt so alive. Her body thrummed, her senses heightened to every move he made. Emboldened by his response and her own desire, she took him in her hand completely, massaging tentatively.

Without warning, he took her hand in his, halting her efforts. Before she could understand what was happening, he pulled away, leaning back in the saddle. His pale blue eyes looked at her as though she were the only woman he'd ever seen, yet he looked sad somehow.

"I'm afraid 'twas a goodbye kiss, lass."

The fire within her faded, replaced with an ache as deep as the ocean. "You can't mean that."

He laid a tender kiss on her knuckles. "My life is so full I can hardly manage it at present. My family needs my complete attention, and you have a tendency to...distract me."

"That's fine," Sybilla answered. What else could she say? She ran her hand along his jaw line, where a scruffy beard had grown over the course of their journey. "I'm not looking to take up your time or distract you. I just want a little adventure."

Her heart sank as she spoke, knowing he likely didn't want the same.

"Well if I'm ever in the market for it, you'll be the first one I come to."



You'll be the first one I come to? What on earth was he thinking? He sounded ridiculous. Why couldn't he just tell her he wanted her but they couldn't be together? How hard was that, really? But when she questioned him directly, somehow the words disappeared from his mind, replaced by his unrelenting emotions.

It also didn't help that he'd been minutes away from tossing her

on the ground and bedding her right then and there. For a lass who'd lived such a sheltered life, she was bold as could be. When she'd started stroking him, he knew he needed to put a stop to it before he lost all control.

He hurried over the steep hill to the keep. A brisk conversation with his laird should set him straight. On past trips, Fintan had felt relief when he finally caught sight of Calder Keep. Its stone towers and imposing façade told him the journey was over, the work done. He could rest, relax, and fall back into the rhythm of life to which he was accustomed.

This time 'twas different. Instead of a weight lifting from him, he felt as though one had settled upon him like a mantle of steel. He couldn't rest when they returned. Not only was there an army fast approaching, he'd have to dive back into night after sleepless night of trying to keep his family alive and happy while somehow still serving his laird.

The destrier's hooves clambered loudly upon the cobblestone courtyard, notifying everyone of their arrival. Rory, the stable master, came and took the horse once Fintan and Sybilla had dismounted. Shortly afterward, Ronan emerged from the keep. Right behind him was Aidan, commander of the laird's forces, as well as those of Clans MacMaster and Drummond.

His laird's face was a picture of shock, his eyes pinned on Sybilla.

The confident beauty took the situation quickly in hand. "Laird," she greeted him with a demure bow, "I hope you'll forgive my uninvited reappearance. We have urgent news to discuss."

Ronan looked questioningly between Fintan and Sybilla. "Let's speak in the solar."

The four of them settled into chairs around a crackling fire. Sybilla sat with her hands folded in her lap, nearest to the hearth. Fintan took the seat next to her, opposite Ronan and Aidan.

Fintan lost no time relaying their discovery of Malcolm's army and their subsequent raids on his supplies.

By the time he'd finished, Ronan was pacing the room, frowning.

“How long do you think we have?”

“We’ve no way to tell,” Fintan replied, “mayhap a sennight if they march straight through to Banff. But it looked like Dundee was the meeting point. He could wait for more men for any amount of time.”

“What say you?” Ronan asked, looking to Aidan.

Aidan leaned back in his chair heavily. “Alec and Donnan will be here tomorrow, likely with some of the others. I say we haven’t many options, but we can sort out the details once we meet with them. Think on it tonight. Decide tomorrow.”

Ronan nodded his agreement, then turned his attention on Sybilla. “I understand all about the army and your journey here from Edynburg,” he said, returning to his chair across from her, “But I don’t believe you’ve yet mentioned how it is you came to travel with my kinsmen.”

“I was at Roxburgh with my father,” Sybilla said, sounding awfully confident for a lass who’d just run away. “He’s there still speaking with King David on your behalf.”

“My behalf?” Ronan raised an eyebrow. “How do you mean?”

“We both felt awful after the, uh, incident. In the autumn. With the fire.” She waited until Ronan nodded before continuing, as though he’d somehow forgotten that horrendous ordeal. “We did bring Lucy here with us, and can’t help but feel partly responsible. My father is in the middle of striking a bargain with the king to see justice done for your clan.”

“What sort of justice?”

Sybilla looked down at her hands, her confidence finally waning. “He never mentioned the specifics to me, laird. I do apologize that I don’t have more information. And I swear I won’t be any trouble. In fact, I was hoping to have a word with Adelina. Is she around?”

Ronan shifted uncomfortably in his chair, glancing at Aidan with a pleading look. Aidan stood, shaking his head at Ronan, and walked over to pretend at looking out the window.

Fintan was immediately suspicious of his laird’s behavior. It wasn’t like Ronan to hedge a question. “Is Adelina alright?” he asked,

worried something might have befallen Ronan's new bride.

"Adelina's just fine," Ronan said, extending his hand in reassurance, "She's with the children."

"Children?" Sybilla asked.

Fintan barely registered Sybilla's question. Over the course of his journey he'd forgotten entirely that the laird's poor saint of a wife had taken charge of his siblings. With an oath and a grimace, Fintan shot from his chair and bolted out the door. He'd already asked too much of the clan, put too great a burden on those around him. He couldn't leave Adelina to do his work for him now that he'd returned.

As he turned a corner, the last thing Fintan heard before he left the keep was Aidan's shout. "They've not been that bad!"

Fintan sincerely doubted that.

Chapter Sixteen



Sybilla hesitated only a moment before following Fintan out into the village. Should a noblewoman be seen sprinting when there's nary a sign of danger? Certainly not, but Sybilla wasn't here to do what was expected of her, now was she? And at present her main concern was Fintan. What in the world was the matter with him?

The last time Sybilla ran this quickly was outside her living memory. Surely she must have as a child, but she couldn't recall. She found herself winded after fifty paces, and had to slow down considerably.

Though all the buildings in Calder looked brand new, on account of being rebuilt after the fire that ravaged most of the village, the layout of it was much the same as she remembered from her previous stay. The blacksmith, the kitchen gardens, the stables, even the library were in the same place as they had been before Calder burned to ash. She lost sight of Fintan when he rounded a corner just past the library.

Sybilla took a deep, huffing breath and drew on the few reserves she had left, picking up her pace to catch him before she well and truly lost him in the tangle of buildings. He rounded another corner, and she simply couldn't keep pace. Giving up hope of following him, Sybilla settled for finding him instead.

Luckily, as she neared the last spot she'd seen him before he vanished, a loud conversation started down a small hill and to her left. Sybilla made her way as quickly as she could manage, though she was having an embarrassing amount of trouble breathing after her short run.

The scene that awaited her was straight out of a play. She'd seen many performances over the years, and the ones she'd enjoyed the most were those that poked gentle fun at the difficulties of daily life, something with which she was almost entirely unfamiliar. Sitting quietly on a tree stump, Sybilla watched the entertainment unfold.

A gaggle of children ran amok outside a small cottage. The laird's wife Adelina, whom she had gotten to know quite well after

being stabbed, spoke softly to an indignant little girl whilst holding a screaming babe in her arms. The girl's hands were on hips, and her golden curls wiggled as she gave the lady of Clan Calder what-for. Sybilla couldn't see her face, as the girl was turned away from her, but she'd wager the little lady had fire in her eyes.

A raven-haired woman that Sybilla didn't recognize, but guessed to be Aidan's wife Gemma by descriptions she'd heard, chased a slightly older girl about the cottage. The girl was covered in mud from head to toe. She ran about giggling, clearly trying to escape a bath that was headed her way.

Fintan was in the process of taking the babe from Adelina's arms. "I'm so sorry, my lady," his pained voice spoke over top of the little girl's ranting. "Thank you, truly."

Adelina waved a hand in the air. "Fintan, I am happy to help whenever you need it," she replied. "And so is Gemma."

The pair of them turned to watch as Gemma finally captured the muddy mess of a girl, who was now screaming and writhing in opposition to her bath. Gemma was quite petite, and the girl was over half as tall as her captor, making it much closer to a fair fight than it ought to have been.

Sybilla had seen enough. No wonder Fintan hadn't been interested in anything more than a kiss. Well, it had been a *bit* more than a kiss, she recalled with a sigh. Clearly, he had at least three other pressing concerns. She hurried over to Gemma, giving her a knowing nod and taking a hold of the child as gently as she could.

"Where are we bathing her?" She lifted the girl into her arms, covering herself with mud as she did so.

"Sybilla!" Fintan protested, "No, you don't have to do that! Your dress!"

"Is just the way I want it at the moment," she answered. She couldn't take another minute of watching the chaos of Fintan's life without helping him. Sybilla hadn't been able to keep her eyes off him for days, so she noticed instantly when he grew more tense. More quiet. When the fun-loving Fintan disappeared beneath a mountain of responsibility. 'Twas plain as day he needed help, and she would make

sure he had it.

Fintan took a step toward her, but the angry head of golden curls moved to block him.

“I’m not finished yet!” she shouted at him. “I can help, too!”

Fintan looked down at the wee thing, holding her own against a giant of a warrior and, in Sybilla’s estimation, winning the battle. He knelt down, the picture of patience, and took her angry fist into his hands. “Aye, a *ghràidh*,” he cooed, “I know you can. And I know you’ll make a fine ma one day. But right now, I need you to go find some new clothes for your sister.”

“But I want to hold Lochie! I can help him, and he’s sad right now.”

Adelina stepped in, taking the little girl’s hand and leading her into the cottage. “Let’s do it together,” she suggested softly. “I need someone to show me where Bree’s clothes are, or I’d never find them. Do you think you can help me?”

The girl pulled herself stick-straight, thrusting her chin forward. “I know exactly where they are.”

“Lead the way,” Adelina beamed, following the girl into the cottage.

Fintan took a deep, shuddering breath before remembering that Sybilla still held a screaming pile of mud.

“I’m so sorry!” He hurried over, quickly collecting himself.

“Bree, I’ve told you a hundred times not to play in the mud yet!”

“I love mud!”

“Well, I hope you love baths, too,” he sighed, reaching to take her from Sybilla, still cradling the screaming babe in one arm.

Sybilla stepped back, out of his reach. “There’s no reason for everyone to be covered in mud. Lady Gemma and I can see to a bath.”

Fintan hesitated, but gave in. “There’s a creek at the bottom of the hill.” He looked at Gemma. “Where are Morna and Colin?”

“We let Morna spend the afternoon with her friends,” Gemma said. “Rather, we made her. The poor girl needed time to be a girl.”

Sybilla watched as Fintan grew even more tense. She hadn’t thought it possible.

“And Colin?”

“I expect he’s at the stables, though he didn’t say. He and Rory have been working to break in that filly.”

Fintan paused, looking at the scene around him dejectedly. The baby let out a particularly wrenching scream and Fintan started to rock him. “Has he been like this the entire time?”

“There’s naught to be done,” Gemma said reassuringly. “The poor thing’s getting his teeth in. He’ll calm once they’re through. Try sticking your fingers in his mouth.”

Fintan looked at her askance, but did as she suggested. The babe calmed a bit, though still managed to sob as he gnawed on Fintan’s fingers.

Adelina and the little girl emerged victorious from the cottage a moment later, dress and cloak in hand.

“Well done, Cait!” Fintan praised.

“I couldn’t have done it without her,” Adelina added, smiling down at little Cait.

“Now for a bath, little miss.” Fintan gave the still-squirming Bree a sharp look, leading the way down to the creek.

Everyone followed. Adelina held Cait’s right hand. Cait triumphantly clutched her big sister’s clothes in her left one. Gemma carried a bucket, a blanket, and a rag. Fintan carried baby Lochie, and Sybilla lugged mud-covered Bree.

Sybilla had never bathed a child before. She knew from the instant her feet touched the icy water that ‘twas an experience she wouldn’t soon forget.

Adelina took a now-screaming Lochie from Fintan, drawing the well-intentioned Cait to her side yet again. Fintan and Gemma quickly scrubbed Bree from head to toe, leaving an oozy trail of mud in the crystal clear water.

Though they worked as fast as they could, given the shrieking and flailing, Sybilla was still soaked by the end. Her dress had wicked the cold water straight up to her hips, sending a bone-deep chill through her body.

Once Bree was dried, dressed, and settled in the cottage, Fintan

insisted that Gemma and Adelina return to the keep.

“What about Colin?” Gemma reminded him. “Someone should go check on him. He’s getting older, but he’s still a lad. And in my experience, lads are just as much trouble as little ladies.” She ended her statement with a pointed look at Bree, who simply shrugged her tiny shoulders.

Sybilla had precious little experience to guide her though the situation. She’d never been around children, except when she’d been one herself. She’d never had to manage such chaos. And she’d never had to read between such complex emotions as what she sensed in this cottage. Still, she made her best effort at being helpful.

Something told her Fintan felt guilty for needing so much assistance with his family. She knew it upset him to be taking up Adelina’s time. Likely the scene she’d just witnessed had only added to his guilt.

“I will stay and get to know these lovely ladies better,” Sybilla interrupted in her most commanding tone, squeezing as much of the water from her skirts as she could. “Fintan, you go check on Colin to be sure he’s where he ought to be. Adelina, I’m so glad to see you again. We can catch up once everyone is settled in. And Gemma, ‘tis a pleasure to meet you.”

Fintan started to argue, but Sybilla stood her ground. As Adelina, Gemma, and Fintan all left to see to their respective duties, Sybilla smiled to herself. She was going to be able to help Fintan. Lord, she could tell he needed it. And all she had to do was keep after his siblings for an hour or two. Really, how hard could that be?

Chapter Seventeen



Fintan couldn't decide if he was mortified, furious, anxious, or some combination thereof. First, he'd had to endure the indignity of needing help so desperately that the lady of the clan herself spent over a week minding his siblings. Then, upon returning he'd learned that it had taken not only Adelina, but Gemma, a *princess* no less, to help keep those troublemakers in line.

His heart sank as he thought of Sybilla managing those three alone. Fintan loved his siblings, but he'd never had to think about their day-to-day needs until his mother passed. She'd taken care of the children. He'd seen to the family's broader needs—ensuring they had a home, food, clothes, protection. He'd done much of the physical labor needed around the house as well. But never in his two-and-twenty years had Fintan imagined he'd need to sit down with a three-year-old and explain to her that her mother had died, let alone revisit the matter multiple times with multiple bairns.

Colin had ever proved the most challenging of the lot. He was a lad just coming into his own. Fintan could see in his every action how he tried to act like a man. At the end of the day, Colin was still a lad, and a struggling one at that. It hadn't escaped Fintan's notice that after their mother passed, Colin struggled with his grief. He refused to confide in Fintan, and Fintan refused to give up on him. One way or another, he'd see the lad back to his old self once more.

The day had turned warm by the time Fintan arrived back at the stables. Spring was on its way back, though Fintan knew winter wasn't banished altogether quite yet. As he walked through the village of Calder, he noticed the small things. The toughest wildflowers had started budding, new growth broke through the winter-hardened soil. He heard the call of birds that had left months before, finally returning to their summer roosts.

He found Colin outside in the stable yard with Rory, setting the filly to task. His brother had made considerable progress since Fintan left. Where before, the horse wouldn't let him put even a blanket over

its back, Colin now worked on getting it used to being saddled.

Fintan approached slowly, knowing 'twas important not to startle the horse or the boy with his presence. He waited patiently, until Colin realized he had an audience, before speaking.

"You're making good progress with her," he commented approvingly.

Colin shrugged.

"Have you named her yet?"

His brother rolled his eyes, handing the reins to Rory and walking over to the fence where Fintan waited. "She's not mine to name."

"What have you been doing while I was gone?" Fintan tried to sound as interested as possible, though he never knew quite what response he'd get when he asked a personal question these days.

Colin shrugged again. "I think you're pretty much caught up." He turned to get back to the filly.

Fintan's chest ached. He longed to get through to his brother, to help him with whatever was troubling him, making him close up like a clam. "Will you be home soon?" he tried. "I was hoping to see you a bit before I need to meet with the laird tomorrow, and Morna could really use some help."

Colin stopped walking away from him, thinking a moment before turning around. "Aye," he answered, "I suppose I could come by. But I need to finish working her first. And I won't be minding bairns like a woman. I should be fighting like you."

'Twould seem little had changed other than the filly's training progress. "I'll see you at dinner, then."

Colin nodded. Then hurried back to Rory and the little horse.

Though the conversation was wanting, Fintan was satisfied that Colin was safe and well for the time being. The lad was only thirteen summers. Old enough to take serious risks, and young enough to get into serious trouble. Fintan did his best to keep an eye over him without driving him further away, and to push him in the right direction.

He'd only left Sybilla for a short time, but guilt wracked him at

putting her through such trouble. What if she'd been so busy with Cait and Lochie that Bree had gotten back to the mud? What if she'd had to keep Bree away from trouble and Cait tried to pick up Lochie and dropped the baby? Thought after troubling thought raced through his mind, propelling Fintan into a quick sprint back to his cottage.

When he reached the doorway, he stopped in his tracks. 'Twas not quite so bad as he'd feared, but poor Sybilla was certainly under siege.

Currently, Cait was stomping angry little feet and ordering Sybilla to hand over Lochie so that she could take care of her baby. Lochie, of course, was screaming and shoving his fist as far into his mouth as he could manage while Sybilla bounced him on her hip. Bree tiptoed mischievously toward Sybilla's back, wriggling worm in hand and a wicked grin on her face. Sybilla was so busy tending to the wee monsters that she'd yet to notice Fintan.

Fintan cleared his throat, abruptly ending the chaos before him. Bree's cheeks turned as red as apples, she thrust her hands behind her back to hide her trickery. Cait turned a pout toward Fintan, clearly ready to explain to him why she ought to be able to mind the babe.

He had asked too much of Sybilla. He should've known better than to abandon her alone to mind his rowdy siblings. They were his responsibility now, and 'twas time he stopped letting others take the brunt of it for him.

Then Sybilla noticed him. And she smiled, her face filled with pure delight.

Fintan's heart missed a beat. His chest swelled, and he found himself unable to stop from smiling right back at her. She didn't look at all like a lass at her wits' end. Nay, she looked positively radiant.

"Well, look who's back already!" she greeted him.

"I hope they weren't too much bother for you." He gave Bree a knowing glance. "I'll thank you to take your wee friend out of the house. And don't be touching any mud, mind you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she lied, "but I'll look into it." She hedged along the wall, keeping her hands behind her back so Sybilla couldn't see the worm, as she made her way to the

front door. In a flurry of devilish giggles, she disappeared from sight.

“That one’s going to be trouble when she’s grown,” Sybilla commented under her breath.

“That one’s already trouble,” Fintan corrected her.

Bree had chosen to handle her grief by finding more mischief. Fintan wasn’t certain precisely how that helped her, but ‘twas where she naturally turned to vent her frustrations.

“She wouldn’t let me take care of Lochie!” Cait interrupted, wagging an accusatory finger in Sybilla’s direction.

“She wouldn’t?” Fintan feigned shock at such an outrage, widening his eyes dramatically. “How awful!”

Sybilla bounced Lochie playfully, making an effort to soothe the poor wee lad. “I do need your help taking care of him, Lady Cait. Shall we fetch him some biscuit bread together? I’ve no idea where those might be, and I haven’t nearly as much experience as you in feeding a baby.”

Fintan thought his heart would burst. Cait had taken to Sybilla straightaway, treating her just as she would any other member of the clan—with utter disregard for rank or title. A pang of sadness struck him when he realized it didn’t matter if Cait or any of his siblings got on well with Sybilla. The lady wouldn’t be staying long, and she certainly wouldn’t be spending much time in his cottage. With war coming and her father no doubt worried sick, Sybilla would be gone far too soon.

And yet, as he watched Cait bounce toward the cupboard, chatting away while she helped Sybilla, Fintan wondered if mayhap there was another way. Was it possible she might stay a while? Would she even want to? Standing in his cottage watching his baby sister giggle and laugh, Fintan thought that perhaps letting Sybilla into his life wouldn’t be so much of a burden after all. Perhaps, he allowed cautiously, having someone to share his days with, a true partner, might make his responsibilities more bearable. He realized, with no small amount of shock, that he trusted Sybilla enough to leave his family with her.

“Cait,” Fintan interrupted, walking over to where Sybilla sat

with his two youngest siblings, “Would you pop your head out the door and see what’s taking your sister so long? I could really use help from someone who knows what she’s doing.”

Cait handed Lochie the last bit of the biscuit she was holding, standing up tall and proud. She thrust her chin up at him, her golden curls swirling about her round face. “‘Twould be my pleasure.” She marched to the front door of the cottage, intent on her mission.

He only had a few minutes before he’d need to go apprehend both girls and drag them back into the cottage. Likely Bree was into mischief, and Fintan expected Cait to shout in horror when she discovered Bree’s newest offense.

“Will she be alright on her own?” Sybilla shifted the babe in her arms, making room for Fintan to squeeze next to her on the rush-covered floor.

Watching her with a babe set his heart afire, and sent his mind to a future he couldn’t have.

“For a short while. She’s a good lass. As long as you let her help, she does as she’s told. A wee bit touchy about being so young, but by far the least of my worries.”

“I think it’s sweet how much she wants to care for her family.”

Fintan looked at Lochie, then his eyes met Sybilla’s beautiful gold-flecked gaze. “She’s always fussed over the babe. Once our mother passed, she seemed to think ‘twas her job to take her place. She’s been fighting me like a true Highlander over getting to care for him. I doubt she realizes she’s only three.”

Sybilla chuckled. “More like she realizes it but doesn’t care.”

Lochie started whining, squirming in her arms and drawing her attention.

She gave him one of her fingers to chew on, and that calmed him quickly.

Fintan felt a lump form in his throat. Apparently he had stumbled upon the sweetest, most selfless woman in all of Scotland. Here she sat, a lady born and bred, enjoying the company of a brood of children she’d just met. “Thank you,” he sighed.

Sybilla looked up at him. “They were no trouble,” she said, the

corner of her mouth lifted into a sultry half-smile. "At least, they were no trouble compared with before you left."

"You can head back now," Fintan said. "I don't want to keep you." Except, the more time he spent with her, the more he realized that he did, in fact, want to keep her. For far longer than one afternoon.

"Head back?" she repeated. "Whatever for?"

Fintan swallowed. "Whatever you need to be doing," he muttered in reply. "I'm certain you've better things to do than mind a bunch of bairns. And they'll be serving dinner soon. You must be hungry after such a busy day."

Sybilla regarded him, her eyes searching his face. "Fintan," she whispered, her voice softer than a spring breeze, "I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter Eighteen



Fintan's sister Morna, the eldest girl in the family, returned just after the bells rang for nones in the late afternoon. Sybilla had no idea what to expect, but her last guess at Morna's personality would have been quiet and dutiful, especially after meeting Cait and Bree.

Morna had the same blue eyes and brownish blonde hair as Fintan. Even their speech had a familiarity about it. 'Twas clear to Sybilla that of all his siblings, Fintan had spent the most time with his Morna.

After the briefest of introductions, Morna took Lochie from Sybilla with practiced hands and guided Bree and Cait over to the fireplace to get dinner started. She laid the babe in a cradle while she chopped vegetables, setting the little girls to rock and shush him. She never once asked who Sybilla was, why she was in their home, or whether she was staying for dinner.

Sybilla watched her in awe. She had thought to offer her help, perhaps watching the babe or distracting the girls. But she quickly realized she wasn't needed at all. This girl, not even sixteen by Sybilla's estimation, brought the entire cottage under control in mere moments. She would be a wonderful mother one day.

As the evening went on, Sybilla realized that Morna was quiet and dutiful, but she was also strong and resilient. Even at her young age, she could be counted upon time and again. Fintan was lucky to have such a sister. The clan was lucky to have such a woman.

Just as they were setting the small table, not really large enough for so many diners, Fintan's brother Colin finally returned from the stables. Immediately upon seeing Sybilla, he froze, his blue eyes pinned to the unexpected guest. He turned a sour look on Fintan. "You didn't say we'd have company."

Fintan crossed the room, taking a seat at the table. "You didn't say much of anything," he grumbled. "Seems fair to me."

Sybilla cringed at the exchange. She knew from the stories Fintan told her while traveling that his relationship with Colin was

strained, but she didn't realize just how bad it had gotten. Morna was busy with the three youngsters and dinner, so Sybilla determined that this was her opportunity to help.

She strode over to Colin, bowing politely. "Please allow me to apologize on your brother's behalf," she said in her kindest voice. "He's only being so rude because he's hungry, I surmise."

Colin's eyes widened at her statement.

Fintan raised an eyebrow at her, but thought better of commenting.

For that, Sybilla was grateful. She didn't know much about babies, and she'd forgotten much of what it was like to be three or five, but she remembered well how it felt to have a guardian who didn't understand you. Luckily for Colin, Sybilla was going to try and remedy that. She went to the table, realizing that there likely were seats that each child was used to sitting at for meals.

"Colin," she asked, looking around the table, "where should I sit?"

He shrugged. "I don't care."

"You have to sit there," Cait declared, pointing at the chair at the head of the table. "That was momma's seat, and you're old like she was."

Fintan snorted a most ungentlemanly laugh.

Sybilla wanted to be offended, but she knew it wasn't meant as an insult. Instead, she beamed at the girl's infallible logic. "I think you have an excellent point there, Lady Cait."

Sybilla took the seat Cait suggested, watching the family go through their evening routine. 'Twas absolutely fascinating.

Growing up, Sybilla had lived alone with her father. They'd had servants, of course, and she had a few friends, but the majority of her time was spent either alone or with her father or nurse. Her mother had died when she was but nine, along with all her siblings. She couldn't even remember having dinner with them like this, as a family.

She watched Fintan and his siblings pass food, share plates, bicker, and laugh together like it was the most normal thing in the

world. The room filled with warmth and family, in a way she had never known.

Quietly eating her meal, Sybilla watched, imagining what it would be like to have a family. To have this feeling every day.

Cait reached for another slice of the warm, fresh bread at the center of the table. Her little mouth tightened in fierce determination, her fingers just barely brushing the basket. She didn't ask for help—she just tried again. And again.

Sybilla was about to help her, when she realized Fintan had been observing Cait's struggle as well. He reached for the basket, but he didn't grab a roll to hand it to her. Instead, he pushed the basket just within her reach and winked at her. When she'd finally gotten her own slice of bread, Cait's proud grin melted Sybilla's heart. In another life, this could have been her family.

She'd had a baby sister once, though she didn't often dwell on it. Would her sister have been as determined as Cait? Or maybe as mischievous as Bree? For the first time in years, she allowed herself to imagine what it would have been like to be a sister.

"So, Colin," Fintan began, trying for the third time that night to coerce his brother into a conversation, "how is the filly?"

Colin's eyes lit up for a moment as he thought of the horse he was training. When he looked at Sybilla, the light faded from his face. He didn't look at *her*, precisely. 'Twas more like he looked straight through her, as though she were a ghost. His gaze fell to the chair itself, and he kept his silence.

"You know I love horses as well," Sybilla commented, popping a piece of boiled carrot into her mouth.

"Do you ride often?" Morna asked, the picture of a polite host.

Sybilla nodded, savoring the sweetness of the bite. "Every day," she replied.

Colin didn't look convinced. "Surely you've missed one," he challenged.

"Never."

"Liar," Colin hissed under his breath.

"That's enough!" Fintan growled, his jaw tight. "You will not

“speak to a guest that way.”

“Or what?” Colin challenged, rising from his chair. “You’re not my father. And she’s sure as hell not my mother!”

Fintan started to argue, but Sybilla felt she needed to clear this up quickly. If anything, she’d want to be his sister, not his mother. She wasn’t even old enough to be his mother. But she was experienced enough to know how he felt right now.

She stood as well, to get their attention more than anything else. “Gentlemen!” she chided. “That’s quite enough.”

All eyes were on her.

“Colin, I am not your mother, as you said. I am not trying to be. I am visiting Calder and then I shall be leaving. The only reason I am in your home is to thank your brother for helping me to get here.”

Colin stayed standing, considering her words. Then he looked to Fintan. “So you’re not bedding her?”

At that ridiculous question, chaos burst forth. Morna jumped from her seat to cover as many small ears as she could reach, shooting a reproachful glare at Colin and hissing her disapproval.

Fintan grabbed his brother by the arm, presumably to drag him outside for an earful.

Sybilla couldn’t let that happen. She knew it wasn’t her place, yet she knew with surety she could fix this. Rushing to intercept the two on their way out the door, Sybilla put a gentle hand on Fintan’s shoulder. “Fintan,” she spoke calmly, but with authority, “May I speak with Colin alone? I believe he and I should come to an understanding.”

Fintan hesitated. She could see the doubt rushing over his handsome features. But he hadn’t denied her yet.

“Please,” she pleaded, before he’d made up his mind against her.

Fintan sighed, then glared at Colin. “Fine,” he ground out, looking daggers at his brother, “but you will be on your *best behavior*. And I will be just inside.”

Sybilla wagered Fintan would be at the nearest window, listening to the entire conversation. At least, that’s what she’d be doing if she were him.

He had to deal with Colin's impertinence day after day, night after night. For tonight, she could offer some respite. More than that, Sybilla had a feeling she knew precisely what was upsetting Colin.

She and Colin walked out the front door of the cottage. He followed her over to the logs where she had sat earlier that day to watch Adelina, Gemma, and Fintan wrangle the younger children. She didn't say a word, waiting for him to break the silence first. If he didn't want to listen, he wouldn't hear what she was saying.

Eventually, he gave in. "Well?" he asked grumpily.

"I know you're not really upset with me," Sybilla began gently. "'Tis natural to be angry when you lose someone close to you, especially a parent. I know it must be hard."

"You don't know anything about it." Anger radiated off him like heat from a forge.

Sybilla knew the feeling well. "My mother died when I was your age." She felt his eyes on her as soon as she spoke the words. She'd never talked with anyone about it. Ever. She'd tried with her father, but he wouldn't listen. He'd never heard her.

"She did?"

"Aye, and my two younger brothers and baby sister. The plague took them all. In three days they were gone."

Colin's silence held less weight now. He was thinking it over.

"My father wouldn't talk with me about it at all," she continued, "even though 'twas just us two left. That's when I started riding every day. So, you were right. I haven't *always* ridden every single day. But I have every day since my mother died."

"The horses help," he choked out, his voice cracking.

"Aye," Sybilla agreed. "They do. And so does talking."

He looked up at her, his blue eyes exactly like Fintan's, yet somehow different. "I don't like talking."

Sybilla's heart ached for the poor lad. "You don't have to talk with your brother until you're ready. Find someone who listens and start there."

"But I *do* have to talk to him?"

Sybilla smiled at his hesitation, trying to lighten the mood. "You

should talk *with* him. You might be surprised at what a conversation here and there can accomplish. When he asks about your day, tell him honestly. He really cares about you. And, unlike my father, I think Fintan will hear you.”

Colin grinned at that. “I don’t know,” he said hesitantly. “He gets so uncomfortable when one of the girls brings ma up.”

“Try,” Sybilla insisted. “And if he really won’t listen, come find me. I can’t think of a better way to pass time than to reminisce about those we’ve loved. And mayhap horses as well,” she added, smiling.

“Thank you.” Colin swallowed hard, offering his hand to help her up. “Truly.”

Chapter Nineteen



The woman was a miracle worker. 'Twas no other explanation. He'd been about to lay into Colin for such an inappropriate suggestion. The lad was old enough to know better. When he left with Sybilla, he'd been a sulking, angry grump.

When he returned with Sybilla, he was smiling. *Smiling*. What on earth had she said to him?

Colin approached Fintan, looking at his own feet uncomfortably. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I shouldn't have said that."

Never in his entire life had Fintan heard Colin apologize. "Think no more on it," Fintan replied, trying to keep calm. What was happening?

"Though, if you are going to be bedding someone, Sybilla's the best lass I've met."

Fintan's stomach lurched. He absolutely could not be having this conversation with his little brother. But he also couldn't risk hurting Colin's feelings. The lad had said more in the last minute than he had in weeks. So instead of insisting it was none of Colin's business, Fintan settled on an awkward half-smile and a forced "Uh, thanks."

"I should be getting the little lassies to bed soon," Morna announced. She sat in a chair near the fire, trying to calm Lochie.

Instead of a peaceful sleep, it seemed Lochie was intent on fighting his exhaustion. He wiggled and screeched, shoving his tiny fist into his mouth and wailing.

"Give him your finger, Morna," Fintan offered.

"I tried. He pushed it out."

Then he remembered the gifts he'd brought. He'd been working on them since the day he left with Donnan. Every time they stopped, he whittled away at little trinkets for each of his brothers and sisters. It kept him busy, and reminded him of his family while he was away. "I've just the thing."

He pulled the teething ring he'd made for Lochie out of his bag, walking over to present it to the wee lad. "Here you are, Lochie. I

think you might find this useful.”

His brother’s fingers worked to grasp the smooth wooden ring, his rosebud mouth opening in concentration. When he finally managed to wrap his fingers about it, he slowly brought it to his mouth, his eyes nearly crossing as he followed its path. He bit down on it curiously, then, realizing the possibilities, started gnawing on it as a dog would a bone. Most importantly, he stopped fussing.

Morna let out a sigh of relief, giving the wee lad an affectionate pat on his shoulders.

“Why didn’t you do that sooner?” Cait had no problem asking bold questions, that was for certain.

“I didn’t think of it,” Fintan answered honestly. “But, Lochie isn’t the only one I’ve a gift for.”

Cait and Bree both squealed in delight, hurrying over to sit in his lap. He laughed at their unbridled enthusiasm, something he’d come to appreciate in the girls over the last months. Cait looked ready to burst into tears when he handed her a comb, made especially for her. He’d asked Adelina, who’s hair curled much like Cait’s, what sort of comb or brush to use. He could tell it bothered the wee lass. He’d made her a comb with wide-set tines, and little ribbons and flowers carved along the edge.

Bree’s gift was a box, carved with all manner of bugs and creatures, so that she could collect all the oddities she so enjoyed.

After Sybilla had mistaken Lochie’s teether for a bracelet, he decided that was rather a good idea. He gave Morna a delicate wooden bracelet, the finest he’d made yet, crafted so that it looked like the branches of a tree intertwining about her wrist. She thanked him, but had to hurry the children to their beds before they got too wild.

He turned to look at Colin.

Colin looked at Sybilla.

Sybilla nodded, ever so slightly.

His younger brother sat next to him on the floor before the crackling fire. He wasn’t smiling, but Fintan felt far less aggression from him than he had even a few hours earlier.

Fintan had struggled for days deciding what to make Colin. He wasn't young enough that toys and trinkets held much meaning. In fact, he feared a child's toy might even insult the lad. But Fintan wasn't in a position to make anything terribly large—after all, he'd been traveling for nearly two weeks. He couldn't very well bring a caber with him and carve it in his free time.

"I know you're a lad nearly grown now," Fintan began, hoping to defray any trouble over his gift, "but I hope you'll still appreciate it." He handed Colin the horse he'd carved.

His brother studied the trinket, turning it over in his hands. At least he wasn't angry.

Sybilla cleared her throat when Colin said nothing.

"Thank you," he said. "'Tis Fiona, isn't it?"

Fintan smiled. Apparently the horse had a name after all. He'd done his best to make the carving look like the filly Colin worked with at the stables. Apparently he'd done a passable job of it. "I couldn't quite remember where her spot was."

Colin stood, holding tight to the figurine. "I think you've got it just right," he mumbled, walking in the direction of his cot.

"I should be heading back to the keep," Sybilla said.

"I'll walk with you." Fintan wasn't ready to let her go just yet.

Sybilla's nostrils flared at his statement.

"Not like your father," he said, striding to her and grabbing her hand in his decisively. He yanked her through the door so that they were out of sight of his siblings.

"Then like what?" she challenged. The golden specks in her chestnut eyes sparkled.

He stopped walking long enough to bring her hand to his lips.

Her breath hitched as he kissed first the back, and then the palm of her silky smooth hand. "Like a man who's not ready to say goodnight."

"In that case," her voice faltered when she spoke, "I'll be glad of the company."

"I want to thank you for what you did with Colin," he ventured once they'd begun toward the keep. "I can't imagine what you said to

him, but it affected him deeply.”

“I talked to him about your mother.”

That was not the answer he’d expected at all. “What did you say?”

“I told him that he was angry because he missed her, not because of anything you or I had done. He’s still deep in his grief, you know.”

“I suspected as much, but he won’t tell me anything.”

Sybilla’s next step forward brought her closer to him as well. He felt her presence beside him like the warmth of the summer sun. “He may yet,” she said, squeezing his hand.

They reached the keep. Fintan turned to Sybilla even as his heart sank. “I don’t expect I’ll be seeing much of you after this.”

She furrowed her brow at his statement. “What makes you say that? I’ll be here in Calder, won’t I?”

“But for how long?” How long before her father saw her returned?

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“And you’d visit me while you’re here?”

Sybilla closed the space between them, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Fintan, you’re the entire reason I’m *here*.”

She leaned in, bringing her lips to his, brushing over him softly.

He captured her mouth in his, entwining his hands in her braided golden hair, pulling her against him.

Sybilla moaned, opening her mouth and sinking even deeper into him.

Fintan took full advantage of her invitation, teasing her with his tongue, running his hands down her sides.

When her hands started working their way down his chest, Fintan let loose a growl in the back of his throat. Lord, he wanted her.

Somewhere in the recesses of his mind, however, Fintan realized ‘twas not yet dark and they stood in full view of the village. With a shuddering breath, he released her. He couldn’t risk her virtue. And though he wasn’t ready to answer questions regarding his feelings for Sybilla, Fintan knew one thing with absolute certainty: he was

definitely not ready to let her go.

Chapter Twenty



March 2, 1137
Calder, Scotland

Everyone gathered in the great hall.

Not once in all his time assisting Ronan had Fintan seen so many clan leaders in the same room. Three clans—Calder, MacMaster, and Drummond—had long ago allied to keep the Moray coast safe for its people. There'd been battles, and the clans had aided one another many times over. But never before had a force the size of Malcolm's marched upon them. To defeat such a foe, they'd need to be ready long before he arrived. Luckily, it seemed like Malcolm was still gathering his forces and they'd have plenty of time to prepare.

From Clan Calder, Ronan and Adelina sat at each end of a long trestle table. The clan elders, Alan, Lowrance, and John, sat near their laird.

Aidan, commander of the forces of all three clans, and his wife, Gemma, represented Clan MacMaster. Aidan's twin brother, Laird Alec MacMaster, and his wife, Nora, were due to arrive any time.

Donnan and his father, Alistair, Laird of Clan Drummond, represented their clan's interests.

'Twas unusual to have so many women present at a war council, but these women were like no others.

Adelina was perhaps the best educated person, man or woman, in all of the Highlands. Her wit and knowledge were indispensable in such a meeting. Gemma had dealt with war on a grand scale many times over, and, thanks to her royal lineage, knew her way around a political discussion. Nora was quite possibly the most valuable attendee. She'd been trained by her father as a spy, and those who knew her background suspected that she yet maintained a system of informants.

And then there was Sybilla. Though she hadn't any direct ties to these clans like the other women, she seemed perfectly at ease in such a setting. Daughter of a noble house and familiar with Clan Calder's leaders, she took her seat next to Adelina and Gemma.

Fintan felt utterly out of place in a room filled with so many clan leaders.

He wasn't noble by birth. He didn't hold an important position within the clan. Aye, he helped the laird manage clan matters, but he was no advisor. The only reason he'd come was because Ronan had asked that Fintan and Sybilla be present to give their accounting of Malcolm's army and the subsequent supply raids.

With the exception of Laird MacMaster and his wife, Fintan was the last to arrive at the keep. He took a seat at the crowded table next to Alan, one of Clan Calder's elders. In the interest of not causing a stir, Fintan forced himself to keep his eyes away from the end of the table, where Sybilla chatted with the other ladies. He knew once he caught sight of her, he'd be far too distracted to be of any use. As it stood, 'twas all he could do not to rush to her and throw her down on the table.

The doors into the hall flew open, and Laird MacMaster strode into the room purposefully. He stopped, turning to hold the door for the woman who followed him. Her brown braids were wind-blown, strands escaping from top to bottom. She wore no cloak in spite of the brisk spring morning, and 'twas clear why. The woman was so heavily with child she looked as though she could drop the babe at any moment. She looked up at the table filled with stares and attempted a smile. In her condition, however, 'twas more of a grimace.

Laird MacMaster offered his encumbered wife a helping hand, leading her to her seat near Lady Gemma. How the poor woman had survived the half-day journey from MacMaster Keep to Calder, Fintan couldn't fathom.

Gemma stood before the laird and his wife reached her. "Oh, Nora! You shouldn't have been traveling," she scolded under her breath. "You'll end up having the babe here!"

Lady Nora waved her hand dismissively. "Gemma, you're such a worrier. I couldn't possibly miss this meeting and you know it." She turned to Ronan, her face apologetic. "I am sorry we're so late. 'Tis my fault."

Laird Alec frowned at her. "'Twas not your fault you couldn't

ride.”

Gemma’s eyes widened and her jaw dropped. “Tell me you didn’t try riding!”

“I couldn’t even mount the damned thing.”

Which, in Fintan’s estimation was likely for the better, as it appeared that Lady MacMaster would, indeed, have attempted riding for three hours in her condition.

Ronan cleared his throat. “We’re glad to have you. Shall we begin?”

At first the conversation was simply a recounting of events by Donnan, Sybilla, and Fintan. Once they’d told everyone of Malcolm, the army, and their attempts to delay his progress north, the room exploded into pandemonium.

“You attacked supply carts for an army that may or may not have been marching on us?” Lowrance, an elder of Clan Calder exclaimed. He stood from his seat to better waggle a finger in Donnan’s direction. “What if they hadn’t been planning to attack? Once they get wind that our clans provoked them, they’ll surely be on our doorstep. For a battle that could have been avoided!”

Donnan’s father, Laird Alistair of Clan Drummond, quickly came to his son’s aid. “Calm yer tits, Lowrance,” he barked with a scowl. “Ye ken as well as I that they acted well within reason.”

Fintan sat back in his chair. He’d forgotten how thick Alistair’s brogue sounded compared with the younger generation of leaders.

“It matters not whether they should or should not have raided the supply line,” Adelina interrupted in a calm voice. “They did. It has happened, and cannot be changed. For better or for worse, we must choose what to do next.”

Ronan nodded at his wife, a look of relief crossing his tense face.

At times like these, Fintan was grateful he hadn’t been born a noble. The decisions made at this meeting would ripple through the clans for years to come. He had enough to worry over with his own family; he couldn’t imagine managing the fate of three clans.

“The army was marching to the MacCready at Banff.” Nora declared with authority. “Laird MacCready was among the first

Highlanders to swear fealty to Malcolm and support his return to power, under the condition that Clan MacMaster be among the first to fall. As we all know, the MacCready has long feuded with Clan MacMaster.”

Lowrance snorted derisively.

Fintan could hardly believe the disrespect he showed in front of Laird MacMaster.

“How certain can you be?” Alan, seated to Fintan’s right, voiced the question at the forefront of Fintan’s thoughts as well.

“Certain enough to tell you of it.”

“I’m sure that you believe this information to be true,”

Lowrance’s sniveling voice grated in Fintan’s ears even from across the table, “but how much can we trust the word of a woman in your unstable condition? How did you even learn such a thing?”

Fintan turned to see how Laird MacMaster was taking this new affront to his wife. If Lowrance had spoken to Sybilla in such a manner, Fintan would’ve already blackened his eye, elder or no. For the briefest moment, he considered the fact that he was comparing himself and Sybilla to a married couple, before determining he couldn’t contemplate the implications of that just now.

Laird MacMaster stood, his fists clenched tight and his eyes lit with rage.

But Nora set a hand on his arm, her eyes boring into Lowrance. “I learned of this plot the same way I learned how much you enjoy frequenting a certain brothel in Elgin, Lowrance, in spite of your recent marriage to a woman half your age. If you’d like further proof that I do, in fact, know a few things about the goings-on in these parts, I’d be happy to delve deeper into your personal affairs.”

Lowrance’s face went red to the roots of his grey hair. He sat down without another word, but continued to scowl at the women’s end of the table.

Ronan chose to ignore the exchange entirely. “Thank you for confirming the intentions of Malcolm’s army, Lady MacMaster. Now we must determine our next course of action. Have you any other information to aid our decision?”

“Laird MacCready has been raising a force of warriors near Torraibh,” Nora replied. “He is preparing for a battle, putting in large orders with the craftsmen and outfitting more men than ever before.”

“His warriors have been spotted less than a day’s ride east of Elgin,” Aidan, the lairds’ commander, added. “They were scouting.”

“What do ye advise, as commander of our forces?” Laird Alistair asked Aidan. “Do we march against them or prepare for a siege?”

“I’ve never been one to sit and wait around to see what will happen.” Aidan answered evenly. “It gives our enemy the advantage. It gives them time to meet us on their terms.”

“So we march?” Ronan’s tone indicated he disagreed with that tactic.

Aidan shook his head. “Neither. I suggest that we take the battle as far from MacMaster Keep as possible, but not so far that we can’t retreat to it if necessary.”

“Elgin, then?” Donnan clarified.

“Aye. We can stage the battle just outside Elgin. But I’d like more information than we have already. How much time do we have? Exactly how many men does Malcolm command?”

“I can make some inquiries,” Lady Nora offered.

Aidan smiled at her warmly. “I’d appreciate that, but I don’t know if we have that kind of time. Depending on the success of Donnan’s supply raids and how many men Malcolm is gathering, the army could arrive tomorrow or two months from now. ‘Twould take days to get that sort of information through your lines of communication, milady.”

“And what alternative do we have?” Alan’s frustration resonated in his scratchy voice.

“Another raid.” ‘Twas Ronan who spoke, eyeing Aidan as he offered his guess.

“Aye,” Aidan agreed. “On Torraibh. We’ll get as near as we can without alerting the army. We can gauge the size of the force and how long they’re planning to stay there. If we’re lucky, we can destroy some more wagons while we’re at it.”

After Aidan’s suggestion, a thunderous debate settled the matter.

They would leave the day after tomorrow with a small group. ‘Twas a two-day ride to Torraibh, and if the army was already marching on Elgin, they’d pass them along the way. While the men rode out to Torraibh, the women would begin preparing both Calder and Elgin for a siege. Though Elgin was nearer the battlefield, Calder was better fortified. They would move the villagers in Elgin to Calder until the army was gone.

The elders of Clan Calder made a hasty exit. Everyone else remained in the hall.

Fintan stood at the same time as Sybilla, only to be stopped by Ronan before he could take three steps.

“Lady Sybilla, a word, if you please. Fintan, you as well.”

Chapter Twenty-One



Sybilla's throat tightened. She'd known Ronan would most likely mention the fact that she was, well, there. Though she'd sincerely hoped he would just host her in perpetuity, no questions asked. She sat back down in her chair, batting her lashes at Ronan innocently. "Yes, laird?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Adelina smile and turn her back to the table in an effort to hide her amusement.

"We have one army marching on us already. Should we be expecting another?"

Sybilla was so shocked by his talk of armies that it took her too long to put together his insinuation.

"Is your father going to send an army after you?" Gemma whispered so that no one heard precisely what she said.

Sybilla inhaled sharply at the thought. "Oh, no!" she assured him. "I'm not even sure he knows that I'm here."

"He may not know for certain, but likely he suspects it." Nora's words were gentle, but the truth of them still stung. "You spent a good deal of time here not so very long ago, and disappeared the same day as a group leaving for the area. 'Tis not a great leap of logic."

Ronan's eyes softened. "What are you doing, Sybilla? Why are you really here? You know that Adelina and I are happy to host you, but not at the risk of the clan's safety."

Sybilla's hands wrung each other like sodden rags as she thought over Ronan's comment. It hurt that he believed her being here could bring harm to his clan, but he wasn't being unreasonable. She'd brought nothing but pain and destruction to Calder thus far. "I understand," she choked out nervously. "The truth is, I ran away from my father. I didn't really have a plan, other than leaving."

Gemma put a hand on Sybilla's arm. "I'm familiar with that problem," she intimated. "Sometimes there's naught else you can do."

"I doubt Sybilla's troubles were in proportion to your own, *mo chridhe*," Aidan remarked to his wife.

“‘Tis little more than a family disagreement,” Sybilla insisted. Mayhap if she made it seem like a small matter, they wouldn’t rush her out of here.

“And what are you going to do about it?” Ronan pressed, clearly not happy until she told him when she’d be leaving.

“You could write your father a letter,” Adelina offered. “‘Twould be a short time before it reached him, but he’d know that you’re safe, here of your own free will, and not in any trouble. ‘Twould take any ill will away from our clans, ease your father’s mind, and you could explain to him why you left.”

What was Adelina’ obsession with letters? Before Sybilla could comment, Ronan decided for her. “Write the letter before we leave for the raid,” he ordered, his voice leaving no room for disagreement. “You can stay as long as you’d like afterward, provided your father knows we’re not keeping you prisoner.”

Sybilla’s chest ached, her limbs shaking in trepidation. She knew she’d have to face her father eventually. If she wrote him a letter disclosing her whereabouts, he’d send an army alright, but not to ravage Calder. Nay, his wrath would be aimed at her alone. He’d see her locked in her room. He probably would forbid her from riding anymore, too.

Sybilla swallowed the lump forming in her throat, turning to see Fintan struggling to keep his mouth shut through the conversation. His lips were drawn tight, his brow furrowed, his eyes staring blankly into the table in front of him.

Far more than she feared punishment by her father, Sybilla ached at the thought of leaving Fintan. When she’d dreamed of having an adventure, she never imagined it might be with a man. In fact, she’d thought quite the opposite. And not just any man either.

Fintan had been in her thoughts and dreams for months after the fire in Calder. Night after night, she imagined what it would be like to be in his arms again, to kiss him as she had longed to do so many months ago.

And now that it was all falling into place, she couldn’t stand the thought of letting it go. She wasn’t ready for her adventure to end yet.

It had only just begun.

In the midst of her spiral of worry, Sybilla noticed Ronan ushering Aidan, Alec, Donnan, and Fintan into the solar.

A warm hand on her shoulder brought Sybilla back from her musings. “We have quite a lot to discuss,” Adelina said. “I thought we might all retire to Gemma’s cottage for some privacy.”

The walk to Gemma and Aidan’s cottage was short but arduous. Poor Nora couldn’t keep pace with the great weight she carried.

“The baby’s low,” Gemma commented, supporting Nora from the left.

“He won’t come early will he?” Nora’s strained question was the only thing she said the entire walk.

Gemma shook her head with vigor. “Quit your fretting. You’re in good hands.”

“The best,” Adelina chimed in.

’Twas well known across the Moray coast that Lady Gemma was the best healer around. She’d saved the lives of countless folk, and Adelina’s boast was no exaggeration. Gemma’s healing abilities were as legendary as everything else about her. Sybilla had no doubt that Nora was going to be fine.

Once they’d gotten Nora settled onto the bed, Gemma set to starting a fire in the hearth and Adelina rounded purposefully on Sybilla.

“We saw you,” she declared, easing into a chair near the hearth.

Sybilla felt the blood drain from her face. She’d done quite a few scandalous things in the last sennight, but only one that she knew for certain Adelina might have seen.

Adelina grinned at her. “I can see from your reaction that you know what I’m talking about.”

“Well I don’t,” Nora interrupted.

“Nora the spy doesn’t know something?” Adelina teased.

Gemma straightened, holding her hands over the newly-crackling fire. “Sybilla and Fintan were spotted sharing quite the kiss last night.”

“Ooh, this sounds good.” Nora groaned, but managed to pull

herself a little straighter in the bed. "Tell me all about it."

Sybilla pretended disinterest, ignoring her heart slamming against her chest. "There's not much to tell."

"Six months ago you were betrothed to Ronan. Now you're kissing Fintan in full view of the *entire village* and minding his siblings for him."

"Don't forget having dinner with his family," Gemma added helpfully.

"Oh, yes, that as well," Adelina amended with a decisive nod. "Now, we aren't leaving this cottage until you tell us exactly what is going on with you and Fintan."

Sybilla crossed her arms. "I like kissing him. Is that a crime?"

"You mean that wasn't the first time?" Nora beamed at Sybilla's clumsy response.

Sybilla's hand wandered absently to the back of her neck as she contemplated how to answer that.

"It wasn't!" Gemma shouted accusingly. "You would've answered by now."

"Have you bedded him?" Adelina asked, scooting to the edge of her seat.

Sybilla's ears burned. "I most certainly have not!"

"Like that," Gemma declared, falling into the chair next to Adelina. "She would've responded like that if she hadn't kissed him previously. So you've kissed him a lot, but not bedded him."

"I think 'a lot' is a bit exaggerated," Sybilla defended.

"How many times, then?" Nora asked.

"Three," Sybilla answered promptly. "In total."

"Are you going to start talking, or shall we continue questioning you?" Nora replied.

Adelina nodded. "I assure you, we have hundreds of questions."

Sybilla searched the faces of the three women before her. All English, as she was. Two of them born into noble families. All of them newlyweds. Was she staring into her future? Or rushing headlong into a grave mistake?

"I wanted an adventure."

“You’re headed for a scandal,” Gemma countered. “Your father will never approve the match. So either you’re ruining your future marriage prospects and breaking Fintan’s heart, or leaving your father without an heir or marriageable daughter.”

“I had to get away from my father,” Sybilla managed. “He wouldn’t let me leave my rooms unaccompanied after the stabbing. I was a prisoner. I thought if only I could escape, prove to myself that I am capable of more than just rotting in a castle doing absolutely nothing, that it would be worth the risk of angering my father.”

“What does that have to do with Fintan?” Adelina’s eyes narrowed at Sybilla’s speech.

“Nothing,” Sybilla admitted. “I had planned to leave. When Fintan and Donnan visited, I saw my opportunity and took it. Initially, I had planned to sneak away from them at the first village and figure things out from there.”

“But then you kissed Fintan.” Nora tapped her chin as she hazarded a guess.

“He kissed me!” Sybilla bristled at the suggestion that she would be so brazen. “What would you have me do?”

“You can’t run from your father forever,” Gemma replied. “Before you write that letter, decide if you’ll be returning to your old life or making a new one.”

Gemma’s words struck true.

Lightheadedness took hold of Sybilla as she contemplated her future. She needed time to think. Alone. “If you’ll excuse me, I believe ‘tis time for my daily ride.” Sybilla fled the overcrowded cottage before anyone could say another word.

Less than an hour later, Sybilla flew over the verdant glen just outside Calder.

Spring slowly won out over the chill of winter across the glorious Highland landscape. ‘Twas only March, and Sybilla well knew that the warmth of the last few days was a tease of weather yet to come. But when she sat on her horse, the wind whipping her braids apart, her legs straining to guide the animal whilst maintaining good form, Sybilla forgot the world about her. All her cares melted away,

fading beyond memory. 'Twas only Sybilla and her horse.

And, for one glorious hour each day, Sybilla was alive.

Except, since she'd left her father, her daily ride was no longer her only excitement, her only chance to prove herself capable of something.

She'd been capable of taking control of her life, turning it in an entirely new direction.

She'd discovered an army. God's teeth, she'd even managed to keep a brood of children safe and happy for a short time, a feat she'd never imagined herself capable of doing.

Aye, she'd made progress, but it still wasn't enough. Sybilla still craved adventure.

Rounding the base of a hill, Sybilla came upon a ravine, covered in thick brush with a trickling creek peeking out here and there through the bramble.

Sybilla was an accomplished rider, but there was one skill she'd yet to master to her satisfaction: jumping.

At first she'd believed the horse needed better preparation for such a daring feat. Or perhaps she needed to bond more with her horse. But after numerous attempts at even the smallest jumps, Sybilla had realized her horse was not to blame. 'Twas her own doubt keeping them on the ground.

Urging her horse forward, Sybilla breathed deeply to calm her racing thoughts. The horse flew toward the ravine, picking up speed as they went.

A rush of excitement swept through her, until she realized she gripped the reins too tightly. Her confidence came crashing down around her. Inadequacy took its place. She tugged the reins accidentally, lifting her heels in surprise at her mistake. The horse came to a dead stop.

So much for proving herself.

The horse nickered at her in frustration, and she patted his mane. "I'm just as disappointed as you are, boy," she assured him.

Sybilla reluctantly turned back toward Calder. She fought her melancholy thoughts as she rode up a steep hill. The same hill where

Fintan had kissed her so passionately before they arrived at Calder.

Her stomach filled with butterflies at the memory. Perhaps all hope wasn't lost. She might not have much of a life to return to with her father, but she might just have the makings of an entirely new adventure right here in the Highlands. Now all she had to do was convince Fintan of it.

Chapter Twenty-Two



“Are you out of your mind?” Ronan growled, pacing the solar where the men had gathered.

Fintan had honestly believed they had adjourned to the solar to discuss the upcoming raid on Torraibh. He was shocked into silence when his laird rounded on him the moment the door closed.

“I beg your pardon?” Fintan asked, doing his best not to sound disrespectful. “What have I done?”

“You tell me.” Ronan was furious. “I know you’ve been kissing *Lady Sybilla*. Have you robbed her of her virtue as well?”

Fintan’s heart stopped. He should’ve known better than to kiss her in the middle of the village. He’d felt guilty about it then. Now he was mortified. “Of course not,” he assured Ronan, though his breaking voice didn’t help his case. “I swear, I’ve only kissed her.”

Ronan folded his arms across his chest, glaring at Fintan. “If her father finds out she’s been fooling around with one of my men, he’s going to lose his mind. She has to go home, Fintan. She isn’t going to stay here.”

“She doesn’t *have* to go home,” Fintan argued, wondering what the hell he was doing disagreeing with the laird.

“Oh?” Ronan raised an eyebrow at his bold assertion.

“I mean no disrespect, laird,” Fintan said carefully, “but you told her she could stay as long as she’d like. Had you considered she might choose to stay indefinitely?”

Ronan pondered that a moment. “Her quarrel with her father is as serious as that? She’d choose to abandon her dowry, her future, her family simply to be free of him?”

“I don’t know,” Fintan answered honestly, “but ‘tis a possibility, is it not?”

Ronan sighed, finally halting in his brooding course across the solar. “I am merely concerned for you, Fintan. You’ve been a good friend to me for as long as I can remember. Laird or not, I don’t want to see you hurt.”

Pride filled Fintan's chest. "I assure you, there's nothing to worry over."

"I'm not so certain. When she was here as my betrothed Sybilla was unpredictable at best, volatile at worst. She could be playing you for the fool, using you as a means to her own ends."

Two days ago, Fintan might have agreed with his laird. Sybilla had a mind of her own, and she was spirited to a fault. Not great with planning ahead, either.

But Fintan couldn't stop picturing her warmth toward his family. She had reached out to Colin with nothing to be gained. She had helped Fintan care for the little ones, though he knew she had no experience with children. He trusted her to care for them, keep them safe when he couldn't. And last night before they kissed, she'd said that *he* was the reason she was in Calder.

"She could've gone anywhere," he said at last, "she could've run from us at any time to hide away in a remote village. She chose to come all the way here. And I think she might choose to stay."

"If anyone wants my opinion," Aidan proclaimed, "I think you should make your intentions with her clear, whatever they may be, or you'll risk losing her. Then, if she's of a same mind, get married and be done with it. And try not to piss off her father overmuch in the process."

Ronan rolled his eyes, starting to pace again.

Alec chuckled at his brother's suggestion. "Aye, you would think that," he grumbled. "But women can be tricky. And women who crave freedom enough to run from their own family shouldn't be trusted blindly. I'd be certain of her feelings on the matter, without a doubt, before jumping into a marriage that could ruin her and endanger you."

Fintan hated how much sense they made, Alec in particular. "I'll speak with her as soon as I can."

"Good." Ronan said. "I'd try to sort it out before we leave for Torraibh."

As the other men resumed talk of armies, raids, and battles, Fintan struggled to pay attention. He stood against the wall nearest

the window, his mind wandering in and out of the conversation over plans for the raid on Torraibh and the coming battle at Elgin. He managed to glean the necessities, but little else.

Alec was right. If Sybilla stayed, she'd be giving up her future. If she truly was here to be with him, she'd be interested in marriage, wouldn't she? But marrying him would mean severing ties to her family and throwing away any chance of marrying someone far more important.

And someone with far fewer responsibilities. Five fewer, to be precise. Instead of months or years of marital bliss as newlyweds, they'd be jumping straight into raising a full-sized family. Fintan knew Sybilla wanted adventure, but he doubted running a household smaller than Laird Calder's stables was what she'd had in mind.

His mind told him a woman like that could never want a man like him. Not truly. His heart told him he was dead wrong. The way Sybilla kissed him, he felt her desire with every touch, every breath. She wanted him, he knew. And she'd said he was the reason she was in Calder.

The real question wasn't whether she wanted him. 'Twas whether she wanted him enough to stay.

The following day was...strange. Shortly after Fintan woke, the sound of horses drew him outside the cottage. Ronan, Alec and Aidan were heading to the border to scout for MacCreadys, and they wanted Colin to come along.

At first Fintan thought they'd come to see if he could ride along since they were under threat. But Ronan insisted 'twas time Colin got to take his first scouting rounds, and with all three of them there he couldn't be any safer.

Reluctantly, Fintan had let Colin mount up on the spare palfrey they'd brought along for him.

They were in the middle of breaking their fast when Adelina and Gemma arrived. 'Twas then that Fintan's suspicions began.

"We need to borrow your siblings for the day," Adelina declared. Fintan highly doubted that. "What for?"

"Ismay is dying to meet Morna," she replied. "She rode all the

way from MacMaster Keep to spend the day getting to know her better.”

“I see.” Fintan did not see, but he decided to drop it. “And what of them?” He gestured sweepingly over his three youngest siblings, all munching happily on their porridge.

“Nora could have her babe at any time,” Gemma answered. “‘Tis the other reason Ismay is visiting. Nora won’t be able to travel back to MacMaster Keep until the babe comes. We thought ‘twould be great fun to bring your adorable family for a visit to help Nora get used to minding babes.”

Cait stopped mid-bite to look utterly offended at Gemma’s choice of words.

“And big girls,” Adelina added quickly.

With a nod of approval, Cait returned to her meal.

“The whole day?” Fintan asked. He had the feeling he was missing something.

Adelina exchanged a look with Gemma. “Actually, we were hoping they could spend the night in the keep.”

“Oh, can we?” Bree leaped from her chair, dropping her porridge-covered spoon in her excitement.

“*Please*, Fintan!” Cait echoed, her head of golden curls wiggling excitedly.

“You’re certain you want to do this?”

“Absolutely. We could use some help in the keep’s garden as well. ‘Tis time to get a few things into the ground for spring. And we’ve weeds aplenty the little ladies can go after.” Gemma wiped off Bree, helping her clean up the mess of porridge she’d made.

“Nora needs all the practice she can get,” Adelina said. “And she hasn’t long.”

Fintan couldn’t think of any more reasons to argue with the determined ladies. And so he found himself alone in his cottage for the first time he could recount.



“You’re up to something.” Sybilla eyed Adelina as they stood in the great hall.

Adelina and Gemma had just returned with four of Fintan's five siblings.

"Of course we are," Gemma replied. "You'd have to be daft not to realize it." Lochie started into his complaining and she walked between the empty tables, rocking and shushing him.

Cait followed behind her like a shadow, pretending to rock her own babe.

"Lady Gemma said we can play in the garden," Bree informed Sybilla. "Do you know what's in the garden?"

Sybilla smiled. She was starting to catch on to Bree's habits. "Mud?"

Bree nodded. Her infectious grin was infused with pure joy. "And worms."

"And weeds," Gemma added from across the room. "I'd appreciate you finding those as well."

"Do you want me to help with anything?" Sybilla asked, knowing full well that the ladies had a hectic day ahead of them.

Adelina walked over to Sybilla, keeping her eyes on Cait and Bree as she spoke. "Actually, I forgot to tell Fintan that we'll drop the wee ones off for their morning meal. Would you mind popping over to his cottage and relaying the message for me?"

Sybilla narrowed her eyes at Adelina, who returned her gaze, unflinching. She knew their ruse, and she didn't like being manipulated one bit. But she did like the prospect of time alone with Fintan. Deciding to leave it be, she headed out to give Fintan Adelina's message.

Hesitation filled Sybilla as she knocked on Fintan's cottage door. What if he didn't want to be seen with her anymore? Surely Ronan had spoken with him just as frankly as Adelina had with her.

Fintan opened the door, chuckling to himself. "Let me guess, Adelina sent you?"

"How did you ever know? They were so subtle."

"I want to talk with you," Fintan said, suddenly serious. "But I have a few things I need to do first. Would you mind coming back this evening? Around dinner time, perhaps?"

Her heart fluttered. It would be scandalous for them to be alone together in his cottage, especially as it neared dark. “I’ll see you then.”

Almost as soon as she’d arrived at his cottage, she turned to head back to the keep. Why hadn’t he invited her in? He hadn’t seemed cross with her, or upset at all, really. Yet this was the first opportunity they’d had to be alone, and he asked her to come back later.

Though the prospect of spending an evening with Fintan excited her, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Sybilla spent the remainder of her morning fretting.

Was he going to politely suggest that she return home and grovel at her father's feet? Was this his gentle way of saying goodbye?

There was another possibility. One that sent shivers through her whenever it came to mind. Would he ask her to stay?

Tottering between two such extreme notions was exhausting, and by the afternoon Sybilla determined her time was better spent readying for the evening.

Normally she wore her hip-length hair in braids, as modesty dictated. 'Twas far more practical as well, keeping her tresses from getting too tangled each day. But Sybilla was not here to be modest or practical or to do any of the things she usually did. So for tonight, Sybilla let her hair down.

She put on the same violet gown she'd worn the night Fintan arrived at Roxburgh. The one that had so angered her father. 'Twas well-fitted, hugging her tighter than was proper, as both her father and Ismay had pointed out the first and only time she'd worn it. When she left Roxburgh, she'd only been able to sneak a few items onto the cart. She made certain this dress was one of them—it had adventure written all over it.

When the rest of the keep gathered for dinner, Sybilla threw a cloak over her scandalous outfit and hastened to Fintan's cottage. She couldn't wait any longer to see him again.

Two horses, one of them the palfrey she'd been riding each day, stamped the ground impatiently outside the cottage. They were tethered to an apple tree, and appeared none too happy at their confinement.

"You're just in time." Fintan's deep voice sounded from the entrance to the cottage. He held a full pack in one hand, two blankets draped over his arm. "I hope you're up for a ride."

Sybilla's pulse quickened as he approached her. "Always."

He stopped mid-step when he noticed her hair. His eyes followed

her long, wheat-colored curls as she turned to pet her horse.

“Is something the matter?”

“No,” he mumbled, his voice thick. “I just—never mind.” He tied the pack to his horse.

Sybilla walked over to him, close enough to hug him, but kept her hands to herself. “I hoped you’d like it,” she whispered boldly. She might not be terribly experienced with men, but Sybilla was no fool.

Fintan cleared his throat awkwardly, his hands forming fists around the pack’s ties.

“I do.” His breathing was heavy and deep. “Shall I help you up?”

Her first instinct was to decline. She’d never needed help mounting a horse. But the look on his face told her he wasn’t even thinking about the horse. “Please,” she agreed.

His strong hands gripped her waist, lifting her onto the palfrey without a mounting block. They lingered, grazing her thigh as he turned to mount his own horse.

“So,” Sybilla asked cheerily, trying to take her mind off how much she enjoyed the feel of his hands on her, “where are we going?”

Fintan started down the hill next to his cottage, moving away from Calder and into the countryside. “I’ve been giving it some thought,” he said, his voice rough, “and I’ve decided to take you up on your offer.”

“My offer?”

“Aye.” He looked at her with those sultry blue eyes, the same color as the sky above them. “I believe I’m finally ready for that adventure.”

Sybilla could hardly breathe. She followed him in a daze, winding through sweeping glens, towering hills, and glittering lochs. The sun sank to the horizon as they reached the pine forest some miles outside the village, its orange-pink light bathing the trees and drenching everything in sight. It reminded Sybilla of the stained glass windows she’d seen in cathedrals, their colors capturing the light as it crossed the sky.

“Isn’t it a tad warm for a cloak?” Fintan asked, closely inspecting her choice of clothing.

“Oh.” Sybilla unfastened her cloak, revealing the purple dress hidden beneath. “I wasn’t really wearing it for the weather.”

Fintan’s lips parted as he fumbled for a response. Apparently unable to find one, he pulled his eyes from the dress, focusing instead on each tree as they passed it.

“So are you going to tell me what we’re doing?” Sybilla tried to hide the nervousness beginning to creep into her mind. “Or shall I guess?”

Fintan said nothing, clearing his throat and continuing to stare into the trees.

Had she done something wrong? Why was he ignoring her? Mayhap the dress had been a mistake.

But why else would he invite her to go on an evening ride miles from Calder? Surely if he really did only want to talk with her, they could’ve stayed in the village.

Determined to get to the bottom of his strange behavior, Sybilla persisted in spite of her misgivings.

“Alright, I’ll start guessing then. Are you going to abduct me and sell me for ransom to the MacCreadys?”

A snort of laughter, but no answer.

“Hmm,” she continued. “Perhaps there’s a witch who can turn me into a goat?”

“Why a goat?” Fintan looked at her askance, eyebrow raised.

Finally. “You tell me. You’re the one with a witch.”

Fintan did laugh at that. Apparently the man enjoyed the truly ridiculous suggestion. “Nay, lass. If some old hag turned you into an animal, you’d become a horse whether she liked it or not.”

Sybilla smiled at his assessment. “I believe you’re right. Now that we’ve decided what won’t be happening, why don’t you tell me what will?”

“I wanted to speak with you.”

“We’re talking now.”

Fintan frowned at her. “Are you always so difficult?”

“As often as possible, though I slip occasionally.”

“I wanted to speak with you *alone*, and to spend more time with

you than just conversation. I know you ride every day, so I assumed riding together might be to your liking.”

Her stomach set to fluttering again. Sybilla didn’t know what to say. Was he trying to court her? Or was he trying to let her down easily—taking her on an enjoyable ride before bidding her return to her father?

Before she could respond, they reached a clearing in the forest.

Dusk settled about them like a cloak, the last rays of light dripping slowly into memory. The forest stilled, perched on the cusp of night but not yet ready to leap into darkness. A hazy glow lit their way while the moon began its rise.

The clearing Fintan had chosen was a mantle of white. Woodland flowers carpeted every inch beneath the trees.

Sybilla dismounted and knelt to touch one of the delicate white flowers, cupping it in her hand like an egg.

“Anemones,” Fintan said, walking over to join her after tying up their horses.

“I’ve seen them before, when I’ve gone riding. But I never stopped to look at them.”

“They’re beautiful.”

A hitch in Fintan’s voice caught Sybilla’s attention. She looked up at him. He wasn’t looking at the flower. He was looking only at her.

Sybilla felt her heart quicken its tempo, but her mind couldn’t stop fretting. “Are you sending me back?”

Fintan furrowed his brows. “To you father?”

“Just tell me, please. I can’t bear it. Did you bring me out here to ask me to leave?”

“Nay, lass. I brought you here to ask you to stay.”

Sybilla ran into his arms. With her head buried in his chest, she managed to mumble her last question. “Why do you want me to stay?”

Fintan’s rough hand alighted on her chin, tilting her head up so she was looking into his eyes.

“Because every day I spend with you, I find it harder and harder to imagine my life without you.” His lips brushed over hers, a promise

of passion, before returning out of her reach.

Sybilla's heart sank. "Why did you stop?"

"As much as I like kissing you, I need to speak with you first."

"And then you'll kiss me?"

"And then I'll do whatever you want."

Her mouth went dry. "Whatever I want?" she repeated in shock. No one had ever offered her that choice before. Always, she was told what was allowed, never asked for her opinions. "Start talking."

Chapter Twenty-Four



“I realize that my life is not an easy one,” Fintan began, taking a seat at the base of a towering pine tree.

Sybilla followed right behind him, sitting so close she could feel his every movement. “No one’s life is easy,” she countered. “They’re difficult in different ways.”

“You won’t have such fine dresses.”

“I don’t care about dresses.” Her hand moved to rest upon his arm.

“You won’t have a lady’s maid.”

“I haven’t had one for weeks.” She turned, sitting on her hip so she was even closer.

“I have a family to care for, every single day.”

Giving up all pretense, Sybilla decided to do exactly what she wanted. With one swift movement, she sat in his lap facing him.

“What is it you’re trying to ask me?”

His eyes clouded with desire at her new position. She felt his body harden against her, as it had many times when they’d been riding together. Somehow he managed to continue their conversation, though she knew he was fighting distraction.

“It seems to me that you’re looking for a life outside of your own world.” His hands went to hers, holding them tenderly. “And I love having you as a part of mine. I can’t ask you to stay without good reason.” He paused, breathing deeply.

Sybilla smiled warmly, squeezing his hands. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think him nervous. ‘Twas hard to imagine a fearless warrior could be afraid of a simple conversation. Yet here he was, utterly unable to ask her the question that had clearly been on his mind all day.

She had spent her entire life waiting for others to take action on her behalf, to propel her forward, to give her permission, to put up walls. No longer.

“Fintan, will you marry me?”

His face filled with emotions, so many that Sybilla couldn't identify just one. "Are you sure, lass? Your father will never agree to it."

Sybilla leaned forward, playfully touching her nose to his. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I don't much care for what he thinks."

"Then yes, my lady," Fintan's grin tickled Sybilla's cheeks, "I will marry you."

"Wonderful," Sybilla whispered. "Now will you kiss me again?"

Before she could draw another breath, Fintan's lips claimed hers. He kissed her hard, his passion igniting a fire of unbridled desire within her. She was finally free.

Determining she would never again wait for others to choose her path, Sybilla took the reins.

Her hands massaged his shoulders, arms, and battle-hardened chest. She explored inch after inch of muscle and 'twas far better than any dream.

Fintan's cloudy eyes watched her every move. The way he gazed at her made it difficult to breathe, let alone think. He looked like he wanted to devour her—and she hoped he would.

When she started lifting his *léine* over his head, he grabbed her hands again, halting her progress.

"Sybilla," his low voice sent shivers of excitement through her, "what do you want?"

Warmth trickled through her at his thoughtfulness. "No one has ever asked me that in earnest," she replied, stunned. "I want you. I don't know exactly how it all works, but I understand the general principle. I want to be yours."

"Then you shall have me."

A hint of mischief lit his eyes as he picked her up and laid her down in the glade of wildflowers, his body covering hers. When he'd visited her months ago in the infirmary, he'd been full of jokes and laughter. Quick to smile. Since they'd returned, all trace of that man was gone.

Until now. Until he captured Sybilla's mouth in his and drank of

her like a man dying of thirst. Until his hands went to the laces at the front of her violet gown, his delicious lips in a cocky half-smile.

“This dress is entirely inappropriate,” he said in mock seriousness, pulling one lace through at a time.

‘Twas agony to wait while he slowly, teasingly unlaced her. Sybilla had half a mind to rip the thing off for him. “My father said the same thing.”

Fintan’s eyes narrowed, but he continued unlacing her. “Normally I disagree with your father.” His lips found her neck, brushing over her skin as he spoke. “I believe the best solution is to rid you of it.”

And he did just that, peeling first the gown and then her chemise from her. His hands and lips explored every inch of her, searing her skin, making her moan.

Sybilla no longer felt the butterflies of first kisses. Instead she felt an emptiness that crept through her core, urging her closer to Fintan, desperate to be filled. She somehow felt more control over her life and less control over her body all at once.

When his attention turned to her breasts, a spark ignited. She wasn’t just going to lay here passively while Fintan gave her so much pleasure. She was going to do the same for him.

Picking up where she left off days ago, her fingers went to the top of his trews, ready to give him a more thorough investigation. Tentatively, she slid her hand down the hard length of his arousal, eliciting a groan of pleasure from him.

As he circled the hardened tips with his tongue, Sybilla’s back arched of its own accord. His hand moved down her stomach until it rested between her legs, where she ached for his touch.

He took off his *léine*, a task she had begun but not finished. Sybilla’s body ached when she finally saw the hard lines of muscle that rippled under his skin.

She helped him, grabbing his trews and pulling them off. Her eyes went wide as she finally saw his manhood. Oh, she’d been handling it plenty, but her fingers hadn’t quite grasped the full effect of it. “*That* is going to fit in me? Are you certain?”

He laughed, stopping his kisses long enough to convince her. “Aye. It’ll fit just fine. Shall we find out?”

Sybilla nodded. She knew exactly what she wanted, and for once someone heard her. Somewhere in the whirlwind of emotions coursing through her, a deep, penetrating joy took hold in her heart. She’d found her guardian angel. Reaching her arms out, she beckoned him to lay atop her once more.

He complied, his warm, hard body pressing against her. Fintan entered her slowly, though she could tell he had trouble keeping his movements under control. His breathing grew ragged, his whole body tight as he moved within her.

She had feared the pain, the discomfort, the awkwardness of trying something for the first time.

Fintan sensed her hesitation, pausing to caress her cheek. “What’s wrong?” he asked tenderly.

“I don’t know what I’m doing.” Sybilla felt like a fool. “How can I help you?”

He grinned at her. “‘Tis much like riding a horse,” he explained, “but laying down.”

“That,” she declared, moving her hips as though she were riding, “is something I do very well.”

Fintan’s growl of approval told her he agreed.

They moved together, Sybilla just as much as Fintan, her fears long forgotten. Each thrust brought them closer together. Each movement fanned the fire building within her.

When she thought she could wait no longer, she cried out his name, holding onto him in the storm of their making. A rush of silence filled her, the world falling away for several long moments. She reveled in the feeling of calm that settled in place of her passion, and in the exquisite sensation of Fintan collapsing on top of her with a groan of ecstasy.

They lay there, side by side and naked as babes, staring at the stars that now dotted the deep blue sky, winking at them through the tops of the trees.

Exhaustion crept up on Sybilla, and she rolled her head to the

side to rest. Before she shut her eyes, she caught sight of the bag and blanket that Fintan had packed for their supper. She couldn't help but giggle.

Fintan rolled toward her, raising an eyebrow in question.

Sybilla smiled up at her betrothed, the man she chose to share in the rest of her days. "We didn't even have our supper."

He kissed her nose playfully. "I've had mine," he teased, taking another desirous look at her, "but I believe I'm hungry again."

She swatted his shoulder, grabbing his thick upper arm and moving to sit astride him. "I think you were onto something, likening it to horseback riding."

His eyes widened, glinting with mischief in the moonlight. "Oh?"

Sybilla nodded. "Aye. But I'm much better at riding this way."

"I think you'll have to prove it, lass."

A newly familiar sensation returned, and Sybilla knew 'twas a challenge she would enjoy. "With pleasure."

Chapter Twenty-Five



March 4, 1137

Fintan woke the following morning feeling lighter than he had in months. Aye, he still had his family to care for and his laird to serve, but now he wasn't alone. Once they were wed, he and Sybilla could spend their days together. And though he knew there would be good ones as well as bad, Fintan was certain that as long as they worked together they could get through anything.

He'd desperately wanted to take her home to his cottage after their time together in the forest. It had felt like a dream, magical and perfect. He couldn't stop remembering the feel of her soft curves beneath him, her golden hair covering the ground like a silken blanket.

Instead of bringing her home, Fintan had walked her back to the keep and then gone to bed. He was to leave early for Torraibh, and he'd need to be well-rested to be of any use in battle. If Sybilla had come home with him, he'd have been far too distracted to sleep.

Not long after he woke, Morna returned with Bree, Cait, and Lochie. He'd not seen much of Colin, but that wasn't unusual. The lad practically lived at the stables. As long as he wasn't a bother to Rory, Fintan didn't mind.

Morna set to boiling oats for the morning meal while Fintan collected his gear and prepared to leave.

"Look what I found in the castle garden!" Bree shouted the moment she caught sight of Fintan, proudly showing him a bowl full of crawling critters and wriggling worms.

"Lovely," Fintan replied, "They look happy as can be."

Morna turned on him. "You're going to let her bring those into the cottage?"

Fintan shrugged. "As long as they're in that bowl it shouldn't matter, aye?"

Morna's glare told him she felt otherwise.

"Let the lassie have some fun. You know how much she loves bugs."

"I picked all the weeds out of the garden!" Cait shouted, not to be outdone. "And Lady Gemma let me *keep* some!"

"How very generous of her," Fintan nodded, pretending he'd just heard the best news in the world.

"What is wrong with you?" Morna had put down the spoon and had both hands fisted on her hips. She was just a slip of lass, but she'd inherited their mother's temper.

"Come now, Morna," Fintan soothed, putting the spoon back in her hand carefully, "'Tis clear these young ladies are proud of their accomplishments. I don't see the need to ruin their enthusiasm."

Morna's glare softened. She turned back to the porridge. "No, you're right. 'Tis just that you're so—," she stopped, clearly searching for the right word.

"Amazing?" Fintan offered, nabbing an apple as he headed for the door.

"Happy." She let out on a heavy breath. "'Tis like you used to be. Before ma died."

"Sybilla should be here shortly," he replied.

"Oh?" The corner of Morna's mouth lifted. "Is she staying with us now? She's a proper lady, you know."

Fintan smiled to himself, taking a juicy bite of apple. She was certainly a lady, but she hadn't been so proper last night. The way she'd sounded when she cried his name—

"What are you grinning at?"

"She will be staying with us," he confirmed.

"Are you marrying her, then?"

At Morna's pointed question, the two wee girls turned to him excitedly. "Are you, Fintan? Are you going to marry Lady Sybilla?"

"Aye," he admitted cheerily. "But not 'till this battle's done with. We've a good deal to do before then, and there won't be time for a wedding until 'tis all settled. She'll be here soon, Morna. She said she'd mind the children so you didn't have so much work."

In truth, Fintan had hoped she'd be here by now. He'd wanted to bid her farewell before he left for Torraibh. But she'd told him she would help Morna, and he knew she meant it. She'd keep her word.

He ducked out of the cottage after saying his good-byes to the girls and Lochie, heading for the keep. 'Twas a warm spring morning, but he knew this time of year that didn't mean much. It could be warm in the morning and snow in the afternoon.

As he walked the path he tread day after day, weaving through cottages and workshops, Fintan had expected to run into Sybilla along the way. If she was coming to help Morna, surely she would have left the keep by now. Did she know how early the girls woke?

Fintan took a deep breath to calm himself. Of course she didn't. She'd never had babes, and she'd have a good deal to learn. But she could do it.

As much as he wanted to quiet his mind, he couldn't quite shake the worry that she'd simply left. Maybe she'd realized exactly what she'd gotten herself into and fled for the life of freedom she craved. Or mayhap she'd only wanted to share Fintan's bed as part of her adventure.

He was being utterly ridiculous. Apparently one night in a woman's bed had turned his mind to mush. Though, after such an extraordinary night, he could hardly be blamed.

When he reached the keep and still hadn't sighted Sybilla, he decided it wouldn't hurt to ask after her. That way he could still see her before they left.

Ronan strode over to him as soon as he entered the courtyard. "Well? How did it go?" he demanded.

"It went well," Fintan said, deciding he ought to wait to share news of the betrothal until Sybilla was beside him. If he went about blathering it to the entire village before she'd even woken, he knew she'd be disappointed.

"*Well?*" Ronan crossed his arms. "That's it?"

"That's it until I speak with Sybilla. Have you seen her?"

"She left the keep just after dawn. I thought she'd be headed for your cottage, so I didn't ask."

A wave of doubt washed over Fintan. Where had she gone?

"Maybe she went to the stables," Ronan offered. His tone suggested he noticed the difference in Fintan. "She often goes riding

before she does anything else.”

Of course. Fintan felt like a perfect fool. She knew she’d be busy for the next few days, so she’d gone for her ritual ride.

“That must be it,” Fintan agreed.

Satisfied with the conversation, Ronan turned and called to the warriors who’d be traveling to Torraibh. The twelve best warriors and the laird mounted their horses, bid farewell to their women—with the notable exception of Sybilla—and left Calder in a flurry of thundering hoofbeats.

Ronan was right, Fintan reminded himself over and over as they turned east toward Torraibh. Sybilla had been riding. She would have no trouble at all learning to manage a family.

Chapter Twenty-Six



March 5, 1137
Calder, Scotland

Sybilla took her morning ride, dropping off her letter to her father with a messenger. On her way to Fintan's cottage, she went to the courtyard, knowing the men would be on their way to Torraibh that morning. She'd hoped to bid him farewell. Even if she couldn't kiss him in front of everyone, Sybilla wanted to see him again before he left. By the time she'd arrived, they'd already left. But she wasn't about to let that get her down. She'd told Fintan she would help Morna, and she couldn't be sulking while she did it.

She wanted to help him, to impress him, to take good care of his family, to be the perfect wife, to learn how to be a sister. 'Twas a greater task than she'd imagined.

When she entered the cottage, Sybilla felt like she could conquer the world. Fintan had agreed to marry her. She couldn't believe how lucky she was to have found a man who respected her, who cared about what she wanted. Just the thought of him filled her with an odd combination of joy and longing.

The first day Morna had stayed with her for a time, explaining how she ran the household, where everything was kept, what Cait, Bree, and Lochie did every hour of every day. The quantity of information Morna kept in her mind was dizzying, and the longer they worked together the more Sybilla's trepidation grew.

Morna left to spend time with her friends in the afternoon, once they'd managed to get all three children down for a nap.

By the time the babes had woken, Sybilla had only to entertain them for a few hours before Morna returned and cooked supper.

The following day, however, the troubles began. Sybilla had Morna show her how to make porridge while Lochie was still content in his crib, with the intention of spending the entire day with the children and giving Morna some time to herself.

At her age, 'twas vitally important that Morna create meaningful bonds with her friends and begin contemplating which young men

might be suitable for marriage in few years' time. More than that, once she'd married, Morna would have a family of her own to care for. She didn't need to spend the last years of her youth playing mother all the time.

When Cait and Bree sat down to eat the porridge, Sybilla turned to Morna. "Why don't you take the day off?" she suggested. "Do whatever it was you did months ago?"

Morna frowned at her. "Mostly I helped ma around the house. There's much to be done, more than one person could manage."

"Surely you used to spend more time with the other young ladies of the village? After your chores were finished, perhaps?"

"Well, aye, but—"

"Ah! There," Sybilla interrupted. "You've done nothing but work and chores for months. I'm here for the next few days, and I insist that you do something out of the cottage that you enjoy. Like Colin works at the stables."

Morna crossed her arms, taking several steps toward Sybilla. She spoke low, so that the wee ladies couldn't hear from the table. "Fintan made me swear I would stay and help you. He didn't want you to think 'twas all your responsibility now."

That sounded exactly like Fintan. Somehow managing to worry over Sybilla and his family when he was leaving for battle. 'Twas precisely why she needed to show him how well she could do on her own. That man needed to loosen the reins, to learn to let others help him.

"What did you used to enjoy doing?" Sybilla asked, trying a different tactic.

Morna looked at her feet. "I liked spending time with ma," she admitted, blinking back tears. "'Tis why I always stayed."

Sybilla placed a hand on her shoulder gently. "I don't want to be your mother," she whispered. "I don't want to be *their* mother," she added, nodding toward the little girls. "I want to learn how to be a sister. And Fintan's right, I'll need your help for that."

"So you want me to stay?"

"I do," Sybilla replied quietly, "but you can't. We will be

spending plenty of time together in the days ahead. Right now, I need you to help me show Fintan that I am able to manage the cottage while he's gone, so he can worry less."

Morna bit her lip as she thought over Sybilla's request. "Fine," she agree reluctantly. "But if you need me, I'll be at the tailor's cottage."

"The tailor's?" Sybilla couldn't keep the curiosity from her voice.

"Aye. I love making dresses." She turned and left before Sybilla could comment.

The rest of the morning went well enough. Colin was edgier than usual and stomped off to the stables with a glowering look. From what Fintan and Morna had told her, 'twas not uncommon, so Sybilla tried not to take it personally. She'd hoped after their discussion the other evening that he would feel more comfortable around her, but she wasn't entirely certain that was the case yet.

Nearing noon, the girls went wild. Arguing, shouting, running amok, and getting into every mischief imaginable. At times, 'twas wearisome. But every now and again, amidst the chaos, Sybilla would stop and watch the joy and curiosity in everything they did. Bree taught her a hundred things she didn't know about bugs. Cait's heartwarming desire to help was utterly selfless. The wee lady would attempt feats far beyond her young years just to be there for her family. When she'd left her father, she'd wanted adventure. But after spending time with Fintan's family, she wondered if perhaps adventure wasn't the only thing that had been missing from her life. Even amidst the difficulties of minding the children, Sybilla couldn't help but see a string of beautiful moments that could only be made by a family.

When Sybilla's stomach set to rumbling, she realized the girls were likely hungry. How had she not considered that? They were bundles of pure energy, flitting about from one thing to the next. Of course they'd work up an appetite.

Sybilla went to make more porridge, not trusting her culinary abilities past what Morna had taught her that morn, only to find the oats were nearly gone. In that moment, panic set in.

She didn't see any other easily prepared meals. She couldn't remember where Morna said they kept their extra stores. How on earth was she going to feed the children?

Deciding she wouldn't let anything get her down, Sybilla balanced Lochie on one hip, took Bree's hand, and led the three little children toward the market in Calder in search of food.

As it happened, managing two children and one baby while trying to figure out who sold what, how much it cost, whether or not they could eat it quickly, and finally make a purchase was more trouble than Sybilla had expected.

She let go of Bree's hand to shift Lochie on her hip. When she turned back, Bree was gone and Cait was in tears.

"Excuse me a moment," she hurriedly told the vendor she'd approached. Turning to Cait, she asked, "Where's Bree?"

Sniffing and hiccupping, Cait pointed toward a nearby fallow field, waist high with weeds. "She pulled my hair!"

Sybilla sighed. Dinner would have to wait. "You stay right by me, Lady Cait, understand?"

Cait nodded, fat tears raining from her sky blue eyes.

When finally she found Bree, in the middle of the field, once more covered in mud and chasing a line of ants through the weeds, 'twas long past midday. Everyone was hungry, the time for their naps had come and gone, and now Bree was filthy.

Sybilla thought she might fall into tears right alongside Cait. How was she going to do this every day? She couldn't even manage it for one morning.

With no other alternatives she could fathom, she grabbed Bree's hand once more and dragged her through the village to the keep. Not wanting to track mud through Adelina's pristine great hall, she led the girls into the garden next to the kitchen. It had been rebuilt in the same place as the previous one, but enlarged so that Adelina and Gemma could grow more of their healing herbs.

On the far side of the garden, Gemma was bent over some plant. At the sound of the gate closing behind them, she stood and turned, her hands going to her hips as she frowned at Bree.

“Gemma, I don’t suppose you have a moment?” Sybilla asked, trying not to sound as defeated as she felt.

“Give me the babe,” Gemma cooed, taking Lochie and ushering Cait into the kitchen. “There’s a bucket and a rag just there.” She nodded toward the corner of the garden where she’d been working before disappearing into the keep.

Cait’s squeal of delight and the sound of dishes told her that she needn’t worry about those two being fed, at least.

She hauled Bree to the nearby stream, the one that ran nearly alongside the keep and supplied much of the fresh water used within it. She wouldn’t muddy the water by putting Bree into the stream, but she filled Gemma’s bucket and used the rag to get most of the mud off the little girl.

“Bree,” she began, working to keep her ire in check, “you must find a way to search for bugs without covering yourself in mud.”

“How can I see them if I don’t lay down next to them?”

Sybilla’s eyes rolled of their own accord. No wonder she was getting filthy from head to toe. “Capture them with a leaf or a stick or a bowl or some other instrument. And look at them standing up or sitting down. Away from the mud.”

“So I can never play in the mud again?” Bree’s bottom lip quivered ominously.

Sybilla hurried to offer a compromise. “What if we choose special days when you can play in the mud? That way we don’t need to clean you up so often, but you can still have your fun?” Though she already dreaded the muddy days ahead, Sybilla was not going to squash this child’s adventures as her father had hers. Even if it meant she had more laundry to do.

Lord, she’d not even considered laundry. She’d never had to wash her own clothes. She heaved a sigh, making a note to ask Morna about it later.

“That would be alright,” Bree replied, biting her lower lip in thought. “Can I know when my next mud day will be?”

“What about every morning following a full moon?” Sybilla could handle a giant mess once each turning of the moon.

Bree nodded agreement, and they quickly finished washing up. By the time Sybilla returned to the keep, the kitchens were nearly finished making supper for the keep's residents.

Gemma insisted they stay to eat, relieving some of the stress from Sybilla's long day.

A warm meal and some adult companionship went a long way to restoring Sybilla's inner balance. She'd felt overwhelmed and out of sorts, but by the time she'd tucked the children in for bed, she sat down feeling like she'd accomplished something with her day.

Until she laid down on her pallet, closed her eyes, and realized that for the first time in twelve years, she hadn't taken her daily ride.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



March 6, 1137
Torraibh, Scotland

Just as he'd predicted, flurries of snow heralded their arrival at Torraibh.

Ronan had brought his twelve best warriors with him, many of his kinsmen among them. Alec, Aidan, Donnan, and Alistair rode near Fintan. The other men came from Calder, chosen for their skill in battle. If they had planned to siege Torraibh, they'd have brought an army. But this was to be a mission of stealth. Aidan would scout, learn what he could, and they'd attack more supply wagons if 'twas possible.

They'd made camp several miles outside the small village, going on foot to devise the best plan for attack.

"Malcolm's not there," Aidan informed the others as he returned from a scouting of the village. "They've around twenty warriors on guard, ten of them near the supply wagons."

"Did you overhear if the wagons are leaving soon?" Ronan asked.

Aidan grinned. "They're worried that the army hasn't arrived yet. Malcolm was expected days ago. They shouldn't be having to send out any more foodstuffs, and the villagers are getting sour at how low their stores have grown. The soldiers are worried the villagers might try to steal the food, and have decided that the wagons must leave tonight. I think we can take the wagons on their way south, but we'll need to be careful. Malcolm's army isn't here, but there are still hundreds of Highlanders who've answered his call."

"We'll wait for them three miles south of the village," Ronan declared. "Too far for them to get aid, and close enough that we can be there before they are."

Several hours later, the sun drifted lazily toward the horizon and the biting chill of winter had resurfaced with a vengeance. The flurries had since become fluffy snow, falling so thick that Fintan had difficulty seeing the man beside him, let alone a wagon through the

trees beyond.

Ronan led the men toward the road, crouching and creeping through the dense trees and thickening snow. Fintan couldn't see his laird, but he could see Alec's sword to his right, using it as a guide to advance and to halt.

A flicker of light in the distance caught his attention. His pulse raced, lightning in his veins. It wouldn't be long now before Ronan gave the signal.

Alec halted. Moonlight spattered Alec's sword in silver, illuminating his change in movement. Fintan's feet stopped abruptly.

And then they were running. Shouting. Charging.

Through snow and trees and brush until they met the MacCreadys in a thunderous clash of swords.

Fintan's heart raced. He ran headlong toward the warrior nearest him.

The advantage of their charge made his first duel short and deadly. The MacCready warrior crumpled before him.

Snow swirled, smarting his eyes and blurring his vision. Forcing him to pause before moving to the next warrior blocking the wagons. The tang of blades rang out in the cold night, but Fintan couldn't see anyone near. He took several quick steps down the road.

Ronan came into view. Defending against three MacCreadys.

Fintan ran. His laird needed aid.

His approach drew the attention of one of the warriors.

Swing, parry, thrust. Over and over they repeated the dance.

Fintan saw only the man before him, utterly consumed in his personal battle.

Until a single image interrupted his thoughts. Sybilla, naked on a bed of wildflowers as white as the snow around him.

When next he attacked, his swing went as far off course as his mind. He'd opened himself up and now he was vulnerable.

His foe took advantage of his mistake. The MacCready warrior raised his sword.

Fintan couldn't ready a defense. He'd thrown himself off balance. Still, he hurried to lift his own weapon, knowing he wouldn't

make the parry.

Then the MacCready warrior exhaled sharply, falling to his knees, his sword trailing wide. Ronan stood behind him, pulling his sword from the man's back.

"What the Devil is wrong with you?" Ronan bellowed. "Let's go!"

"Ronan!" Aidan's voice cut across the battle scene long before he appeared beside them. "The carts are gone!"

Ronan swore, called his men to him, and took off down the road.

Fintan followed him. They had no time to waste. Though the carts weren't terribly quick overland, they could make a hustle if they needed. With the heavy snowfall, no one had seen them sneak away from the battle. 'Twas impossible to see much. The snow surrounded them in walls of white.

And if the carts got away, the army would be fed. And they would've wasted four days of preparation on a fruitless endeavor.

The road fell away beneath his feet, the snow pelted his eyes until they stung, and the short time he ran became an eternity.

When at long last a shout rose up that the wagons lay ahead, Fintan breathed a sigh of relief.

Their mission would be a success.

Even as the men torched the wagons, loosed the horses from their carts, and tied up any drivers brave enough to stay, the high of victory eluded Fintan.

Cheering, laughing, joking. The men's spirits soared as they left the burning wagons and returned to their mounts.

"I've never seen a man look so despondent in victory," Ronan commented, falling into step beside him.

"'Tis every reason to celebrate," Fintan grumbled. Lord, why was he grumbling?

"Aye." Ronan agreed, "We've just bought ourselves even more days to prepare for battle. And if we're lucky, Malcolm's men will be hungry and exhausted whenever they do finally arrive."

Fintan nodded, but didn't have anything to add to Ronan's assessment. He should be as happy as everyone else. But not everyone

had been so distracted they'd nearly gotten themselves killed.

"What's going on, Fintan? We've been friends since we were lads. I know when something's bothering you."

"I've made a grave mistake." Saying the words aloud only dug the dagger deeper.

"We all miscalculate in the heat of battle sometimes," Ronan replied. "We can run drills tomorrow. Don't let it take away the sweetness of victory."

Fintan stopped walking. "'Tis not battle of which I speak."

Ronan halted a few steps later. "You bedded her?"

It worried Fintan even more that Ronan didn't sound the least surprised at the notion. "She asked me to marry her."

"I'd say that sounds more like a commitment than a mistake." Ronan's tone made it clear he planned to enforce it as such if necessary.

"But—" Fintan began.

Ronan wouldn't let him argue. "I realize there is a significant problem in getting her father's approval, but you wouldn't be the first person in the clan to marry above their rank. 'Twill prove a far greater challenge to Sybilla. Though she'll always have Gemma to commiserate. 'Tis easy to forget Lady Gemma is the daughter of kings."

"You're right," Fintan muttered, trying not to sound ungrateful. "Thank you."

Ronan clapped him on the back, congratulating him on his betrothal, before shoving him to keep walking.

What Ronan didn't realize, however, was that Sybilla's higher status was the least of his marital concerns. Aye, 'twould prove troublesome, but as Ronan had said others before them had managed it.

Fintan worried that he wouldn't be able to manage the distractions of having such a lovely wife waiting for him upon his return. It sounded ridiculous even in his own mind. He was suddenly grateful Ronan had cut him off.

Ridiculous though it might sound, he'd nearly died in battle

today because he'd been distracted. And that's saying nothing as to the problems his life presented for Sybilla.

She'd never had to manage one child, let alone five rowdy ones. She'd never lived without servants, never run a household. God's bones, the woman had hardly stepped outside of a castle. She was used to spending her days alone, doing whatever she pleased to pass the time.

He didn't hold that against her, of course, but he worried it would lead her to resent him once she realized that his life was filled with work and discomfort from sunup to sundown. And what of her need for adventure, her thirst for life?

Long before he'd returned to Calder, Fintan couldn't help but wonder if his life might run more smoothly without a wife. And, even more upsetting, if Sybilla might be better off without all his burdens.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



March 8, 1137
Calder, Scotland

Four full days. Sybilla had watched, listened, bathed, soothed, fed, and tucked in the three youngest children. And it had been utterly eye-opening.

The first two days reminded her a good deal of being stabbed. First, shock. Followed quickly by a false sense of calm, bordering on numbness. By the second night, Sybilla was in a full-on panic. How was she ever going to do this every single day?

But the sun came up the following morn. A beautiful, breathtaking dawn. She wandered to the stables, watching the horses prance and play in the golden light. A strange sense of peace washed over Sybilla, a feeling she'd never experienced so fully before.

The truth was, she reminded herself, she'd never had to take care of *herself* for any length of time, let alone *other people*. Like every new skill, it would take time. And it certainly felt like an adventure.

On an hourly basis she encountered new feelings, new problems, turns of phrase she never thought she'd find herself using. Really, who would ever have guessed she'd be telling anyone to "take those worms out of your hair and put them back into the pot"? She'd laughed even as she'd said it.

And, best of all, no one was following her around as though she were made of glass, waiting to catch her and keep her from breaking. It wasn't always an easy life, but at least she was finally living it.

She and Morna had reached an agreement of sorts, in which both were able to do the things that mattered most, while still ensuring the family was looked after. Every morning, they all woke and broke their fast together. By the third day, Sybilla had even pulled Colin aside and insisted he do the same. Then Morna and Colin were free to go about their days as long as their chores were finished.

One of Morna's chores became preparing a few small snacks for the children to eat throughout the day while Sybilla was alone with them. After the great meal catastrophe of day two, Sybilla wasn't

about to be left without a quick repast handy. And she certainly wasn't going to trust herself to cook a dinner that everyone would eat.

Morna and Colin returned for dinner each day, and the family spent the rest of the evening together. Colin fought Sybilla the first day she explained her wishes, but a quick chat with Rory at the stables made it clear to Colin that she meant business. Sybilla knew a word from his mentor meant far more than a word from her, or even Fintan.

Having lived most of her life completely alone, Sybilla understood the value of having a family.

The most important part of their arrangement was her daily ride. After missing her ride for the first time in twelve years, Morna agreed to mind the cottage while she prepared the day's meals so that Sybilla could have an hour to herself.

Four days after Fintan left for Torraibh, Sybilla hurried to the stables as she did every day. In no time she soared across the glorious Highland landscape once more. Rolling green hills, now with patches of purple, pink, and white smattered throughout, gave way to lush forests. And all of it was surrounded by the towering mountains that were visible from nearly every step of her ride.

Since Fintan had left, Sybilla began riding along the borders of Calder, or as near them as she could within the hour she spent riding. On her way, she always took the path that meandered past the loch. Nothing lifted her spirits like watching the sparkle of sunlight over the deep blue waters.

At any other time in her life, she might have felt overwhelmed or burdened by her new responsibilities. But right now, with Fintan gone risking his own life once more, Sybilla was grateful for the distraction of running a household and the companionship of his five siblings.

Only during her ride did she allowed herself to wonder and fret at his absence. Did he live? Was he well? Did they succeed? Would he return? A litany of questions pounded through her mind in time to the horse's hoofbeats.

And, predictably, as she approached the eastern border, the one

nearest the MacCready, her frenzied thoughts grew to a crescendo of desolation, culminating in one, singular question: What if he didn't return?

Normally, she would then ride the entire eastern border in a state of utter misery, worried sick and wondering if she'd ever see her guardian angel again. Today, halfway into her ride, Sybilla heard other riders approaching.

Some small part of her knew that she should flee, take cover, and be certain it wasn't Malcolm's army.

Instead she galloped. Full speed, fearless, and thrilled to pieces. The men had returned, she just knew it.

Her intuition was rewarded when first Ronan, Aidan, and Alec came into sight. Pushing her poor, sturdy palfrey to its limit, Sybilla rushed toward them. Her eyes scanned the ranks for Fintan.

Her pulse raced when she found him. Her heart fluttered. He was alive.

And he was angry.



Apparently his misgivings were well-founded. Here she was, at midday, riding at her leisure. Fintan had no one to blame but himself. He should never have asked such a monumental task of her before she'd had time to grow accustomed to family life.

Though his anger was directed mainly at himself, and his own foolishness, Fintan couldn't manage to hide his displeasure from Sybilla. "What are you doing?" He heard his own gruff voice, as though it had been spoken from far away and hadn't come from his own mouth.

Sybilla looked to Ronan, then frowned at Fintan. "I'm glad you've all returned," she replied. Her voice held a question her words didn't ask.

"We've returned, and have successfully delayed Malcolm further yet," Ronan declared, eliciting hoots of pride from the warriors behind him. "Good day, my lady." He rode forward, leading his horse next to Fintan's. "You're dismissed to see to your family," he said before riding off toward Calder with the rest of the warriors.

Sybilla rode up next to him. "I missed you," she said softly. "It went well, then?"

"Aye."

"Fintan, what's wrong?" Her delicate brows knitted with worry.

"I didn't expect to see you out riding," he grumbled.

Her lips fell into a frown. "Morna's minding the children, if that's your concern. I take my daily ride before she leaves in the morning. Did you really think I'd just abandon them?"

Fintan sighed deeply. What on earth was wrong with him?

"You're right," he replied gently. "Of course you'd never just leave. But 'tis not only the children that concern me. 'Tis dangerous to ride so far on your own with Malcolm's army approaching."

"But Ronan said they were days, or even weeks, away."

"And every day they march nearer."

Sybilla put a warm hand on his cheek, her full lips curving into a smile. "You don't have to worry. I'll be just fine. Come ride with me." She winked at him, clearly thinking of a very different version of riding.

Fintan relented. Pulling her against him, he stole one brief, searing kiss that left them both gasping. "I'm afraid I've more business in the keep, lass."

Her shoulders sank, but she didn't protest. "Perhaps tonight, then." After blowing him a playful kiss, she turned and rode away. "I'll meet you at the cottage!"

Fintan knew Sybilla was right. And he felt horrible about thinking she'd just leave his family. Of course she wouldn't. But he wasn't about to budge regarding her safety. He nudged his horse toward Calder, brooding.

Sybilla's ride was important. Fintan could understand the significance of a routine, particularly one begun to deal with grief. It had become a ritual for her.

But what if the army came early? What if Ronan's scouts missed them somehow? What if they found Sybilla? She could be hurt, killed, captured. Aye, he'd need to speak with her about halting her daily ride until the battle was over. She'd not like it, he knew, but hopefully

she'd understand that 'twas for her own safety.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



March 9, 1137

Sybilla had never felt more alive. Riding her horse, helping the clans prepare for the coming battle, knowing that she was finally *doing* something with her time brought her profound joy. Even Fintan's sour mood couldn't ruin her fine day.

After their brief meeting upon his return from Torraibh, Sybilla had finished her ride and returned to watch the children.

Fintan brooded in silence for the rest of the day, leaving to help Ronan for several hours in the afternoon. In the evening he kept his own counsel, in spite of Sybilla's best efforts to draw out his troubles.

She wondered if something had happened at Torraibh that had upset him so deeply. In time, she knew he would confide in her. And she was more than happy to wait.

Right now, Sybilla's worries fell further from her mind with every step her horse took.

In the face of a coming battle and possible siege, many preparations were needed. Clan MacCready did not share a border with Clan Calder. Clan MacMaster did. In order for Malcolm's army to reach Calder, he would first need to march through the MacMaster stronghold at Elgin.

Elgin, being comprised mainly of timbers with little stone, was defensible but not impenetrable. If Malcolm thought to burn it, 'twould be difficult to stop him. For their own safety, the villagers in and around Elgin had to relocate to Calder lands until the battle was over.

As the warriors were busy recruiting and arming more fighting men, it fell to the women to oversee the travels of the villagers. As the most competent rider, Ronan had recruited Sybilla to ride between Elgin and Calder for the day or two it took for everyone to make the journey. Back and forth and over again, she rode along the route the villagers walked from one keep to the other, watching for trouble both within and without.

Sybilla couldn't have been more thrilled.

Ismay, Morna, and Fintan's youngest siblings were tasked with keeping an eye on Nora, who was in no condition to do much other than sit and occasionally walk. Her back had started giving her spasms of pain over the past days, and even with Gemma's curatives she spent her time in a good deal of pain.

Thus far, the day had gone exceedingly well.

When they'd first begun, Sybilla had thought it would be so simple and straightforward a task that she'd be bored before midday. She was pleasantly relieved to find that, rather predictably, trouble can be counted upon in even the most mundane of tasks. Between wrenched ankles, forgotten belongings, and runaway pets, Sybilla was so busy she had no time to fret over Fintan's poor mood from the day before. Until he came and found her.

During one of her afternoon stops in Calder, he approached her, beckoning her down from her horse.

Between the tightness in his jaw and the anguish on his face, Sybilla wasn't certain she wanted to get off her horse.

"How goes the recruiting?" she asked cautiously, sliding off her horse to greet him.

"Well." He ran a hand through his dark blonde hair. "Sybilla, I need to speak with you, and I don't think you're going to like it."

Sybilla's head spun. She'd been worried when he'd not shared her bed the night prior, after being away for so long. Indeed, he hadn't seemed at all happy to have returned. "You wish to end our betrothal."

His eyes widened, blue orbs the same color as the sky above them. "No!" His shout drew the attention of several passersby. "No," he repeated, quieter, "I don't wish that at all."

An exhale of relief escaped her lips.

He drew her into his arms, embracing her tightly. "I worry over you," he whispered into her hair. "That is what I wanted to discuss."

Sybilla's relief dissipated into the breeze. She'd heard those very words a hundred times before she fled her father, hoping to never hear them again. "What of it?"

"There's an army approaching, *mo chridhe*. Malcolm alone

terrified you; I saw it on your face when he sat beside you. His army will be far worse.”

Sybilla stiffened in his arms.

He rubbed her shoulders, but it didn’t soothe her discomfort.

He sounded far too much like the man she’d just left.

“I know how important your daily ride is to you, but I would ask that you stop going once I leave for Elgin. Just until the battle is won.”

“No.”

His brows furrowed as he looked down at her. “No?”

“You heard me.” She backed out of his arms, crossing her own angrily. “Not even my father asked such a thing. I didn’t leave him only to be locked away by you.”

“I’m not locking you away,” he growled, his voice low and deep, “and I’m not asking.”

Sybilla shot him a withering look. “I am perfectly able to judge danger for myself.”

Fintan ran a hand down his face, frowning. “You wouldn’t know danger if it ran at you with an axe,” he replied. “Your father did you a great disservice by keeping you so far from the real world.”

“Aye, and now you’re trying to do the same.”

“‘Tis entirely different,” Fintan’s exasperation hung on every word. “There’s an army, a battle. People will die, Sybilla, and I won’t have you among them.”

Sybilla couldn’t decide if she was about to dissolve into a fit of anger or tears, but she knew she needed a quick exit. “Your concern is noted, and I choose to ignore it.”

Fintan started to protest, but Sybilla hurried toward the keep before he could stop her.

Darkness fell around her when she stepped in the door. It took her eyes several moments to adjust to the dim light in the great hall. She could hear the movements of dozens of people, chairs sliding across the rushes, platters clanging atop tables. The keep thrummed with activity. When finally she could see well enough to move around, she spotted Ismay marching right for her.

Ismay's lips twitched. Her eyes beamed. She was desperately trying to keep herself from smiling.

Pushing her own frustration with Fintan out of her mind, Sybilla intercepted Ismay, yanking her into an alcove far from anyone else. "What are you so happy about?" she asked, knowing immediately that her friend had good news to share.

"Taran is coming."

For a moment, Sybilla thought she'd misheard. "What! How?" Then she remembered her dear Ismay's deviousness. "What did you do?"

Ismay's hopeful eyes darted across the room. "I sent a letter."

Sybilla groaned. "Ismay, just tell me the whole of it before I die of curiosity!"

"Well, I knew that even with the three clans, we'd be no match for the size of Malcolm's army," she said quietly. "So I sent a message to Taran telling him we needed aid."

"What!" Sybilla couldn't keep her voice down.

Ismay's hand covered Sybilla's mouth. "No one can know!" Slowly removing her hand, she continued her tale. "I've just gotten his return letter. Today."

"What did it say?"

A wicked grin broke across Ismay's delicate features. "They'll be here any day. Today, tomorrow. Possibly the next. Apparently between Taran's suggestion and your father's insistence, David left shortly after they received my message."

Sybilla could hardly keep still. They might win after all.

"I have two favors to ask," Ismay added hesitantly.

"First?"

"Please don't tell anyone that it was me who sent the message," Ismay pleaded.

"When David shows up ready for battle, they'll figure out you arranged it, you know. There's no need to be so secretive."

"Taran told David it was an anonymous informant who had seen the army near Edynburg. It earned him a promotion."

Sybilla looked at Ismay knowingly. "He'll be coming with David,

won't he?"

A flush colored Ismay's cheeks. "Aye."

"Fine," Sybilla agreed, "I'll not breathe a word. And the second favor?"

"Ride out tomorrow morn. After the men leave for Elgin, look for David's army so that you can 'happen' upon them. We need to intercept them and send them to Elgin instead of Calder."

Fintan's request to stop riding returned to her thoughts like a fire roaring to life. First it gave her pause. Then it made her angry.

He, of all people, understood why she went riding. He understood why she'd left her father. And still, he'd *ordered* her not to ride out. Well, she was going to continue having an adventure, whether he liked it or not.

Sybilla looked Ismay dead in the eyes to give her answer. "It would be my pleasure."

Chapter Thirty



March 10, 1137

The following morning, Sybilla felt truly melancholy for the first time since she'd come to Calder. Fintan was leaving for battle, after they'd had an argument no less, and she couldn't shake the feeling of guilt at planning to go riding the moment he left.

But really, he was being ridiculous. The army was marching toward Elgin. The battle was not only miles, but also days away. The borders of Calder were perfectly safe for a quick ride once a day. Of course, much like her ridiculous father, Fintan couldn't see it.

In addition to their argument, Fintan had been so quiet since he'd returned that they hadn't discussed announcing their betrothal to anyone. It had been all Sybilla could do to keep it to herself when he'd left for Torraibh. The prospect of spending her days in Calder with Fintan sent shivers of excitement through her. Truly, her life would be an adventure.

But when Fintan returned he had changed. Instead of sweeping her into his arms and declaring his undying love, he stood silent. Instead of telling her she'd done a wonderful job playing at mother with his family, he'd forbid her to go riding. Though he had said he still wanted her, Sybilla wasn't so sure she believed him.

"Thank you so much, Sybilla," Ismay breathed gratefully, gliding into the cottage like she lived there.

"Twas actually the first time she'd visited.

"Are you alright?" she asked, cocking her head and regarding Sybilla.

Ismay had that look about her as she helped Bree and Cait clean up after their porridge. The one where she was about to make a horribly perceptive observation regarding something Sybilla would prefer to keep private.

"Twas time to go. "Aye. Everything's perfect. 'Tis my pleasure. I'll see you in a bit." The words tumbled out as Sybilla hastily exited the cottage.

Ismay wouldn't be getting any stories from her this morning.

Especially not about a handsome warrior angel who'd rescued her, bedded her, then ignored her.

"Did you bid Fintan farewell?" Ismay shouted nosily from within the cottage.

"No. Everything's fine!" Sybilla called back, hurrying to the stables before Ismay could get another word out.

As always, Colin was there with Rory, earning his keep and working with his filly, Fiona.

When he caught sight of her, he fetched her saddle and brought it to her horse.

Sybilla eyed the young lad suspiciously. He'd never before acknowledged her presence in his domain, let alone set about helping her, in spite of the fact that she visited every morn. "Why, thank you, Colin." She tried to hide the surprise from her voice.

"Where are you riding?"

"Oh, the same place as always."

"Which is?"

If Sybilla had hackles, they'd be raised. The boy was up to something. As an unapologetic plotter herself, she could sense it easily. "I ride the perimeter of Calder lands, as wide a ring as I can within an hour."

He finished saddling her horse, giving the palfrey a gentle pat. "Can I come with you?"

A flurry of thoughts descended upon Sybilla like crows on a wheat field. Initially, she thought to decline him. After all, she wasn't only going for her ride today. She was also hoping to run into David's army.

But something made her reconsider.

Perhaps it was the desperate, pleading look on Colin's young face. Perhaps it was the insecurity she felt from Fintan's inattention. Perhaps it was the memory of her father telling her 'no' every single day until the day she left.

Whatever the reason, Sybilla decided that if Colin was reaching out, she would be there to grab his hand. "Aye," she announced after a few moments of contemplation. "Saddle your horse."

In no time, Sybilla and Colin trotted out of Calder village, side by side. Farmers tended their fields now, turning out the soil and starting the long work of preparation before planting weather arrived. Though 'twas still wickedly chill at night, the spring festival of Lady Day was only a few weeks away.

By the time they reached the first turn in her route, Sybilla could no longer keep her mouth shut. "Why did you ask to come with me?"

"I heard Ronan ask you the other day, when they were moving all the villagers. He asked you to keep watch over them. Ride out and back, scout along the borders."

"You know that's not why I'm riding now, though."

Colin snorted in disagreement. "Isn't it? The laird might not have asked, but I think you ride the border route because you want to help, and there isn't much else we can do."

Sybilla mumbled her agreement. He'd told her everything she needed to know. "Aye, there isn't much else we can do."

Colin grew serious. "Fintan started acting like my father as soon as da died, even though he's not *that* much older than me. Now he won't leave me alone. He's always asking me questions, trying to get me to talk to him. 'Where are you going, Colin?' 'Why are you leaving, Colin?' 'Are you alright, Colin?'"

Sybilla wanted to laugh at his belly-deep impersonation of Fintan, but managed to contain herself. She was getting through to Colin, and she couldn't botch it now. "I have no idea what it's like to have a big brother. But I do know how it feels to have someone not understand what you're going through, or how to help you with it."

"You do?"

"I tried to tell my father two weeks ago that I was unhappy. That I didn't appreciate how he treated me like a child of three instead of a woman of one-and-twenty. Do you know what he said to me?"

Colin shook his head, intent on her story now.

"He asked if I was sewing any new dresses."

"He didn't!"

"I swear on Christ's blood," Sybilla said, silently begging the Lord to forgive her oath. She knew it would sit better with Colin, and

she needed to drive her point home. “He never heard a thing I said.”

“So you left.”

“I did,” Sybilla replied hesitantly. “But Fintan is not like my father. He’s your brother, though he’s likely forgotten what that feels like. The weight of responsibility can change a person, Colin. And don’t forget, he’s grieving, too.”

Colin didn’t reply, but Sybilla could see him processing her words. She didn’t dare interrupt.

They rode on along the route in companionable silence. Sybilla saw no signs of any armies or kings as they went. She contemplated a gentle way to tell Colin that he could help by caring for his young siblings with Morna, but she didn’t want to scare him off just when he’d started opening up to her. She’d have to earn his trust first.

Before long, they rode past the same ravine she’d tried jumping. The ravine she’d failed to jump. God’s bones, she hadn’t even left the ground! Sybilla glared at it with every ounce of disgust she could muster. One day, she’d do it.

“Why do you look as though you want to murder the ravine?” Colin’s confused glance nearly made her laugh. He must think her mad.

“I can’t make that jump,” she admitted bitterly.

He looked even more confused. “But you’re the best rider I know.”

Sybilla sat up taller in her saddle, still scowling. “Thank you, Colin, truly. But jumps that wide are difficult for even an expert rider. I know of only one or two who could make it, and they’ve trained many hours with their horses to do so.”

Colin opened his mouth to reply. A crack sounded in the distance, drawing their attention to the forest at the eastern border of Calder, directly to their left.

Sybilla held her hand out, signaling silence.

They both listened. Another branch snapped. Closer.

Panic shot through Sybilla like lightning striking a tree. Someone was coming. Maybe two people. Certainly not an army. If anything happened to Colin, she’d never forgive herself.

“Go,” she hissed, her voice low. “Ride back. Wait for me at the stables.”

“But...”

“Now!” she snapped as quietly as she could.

Colin glowered at her, but did as she bid him. Once he was well away from the forest, halfway across the glen, Sybilla turned her attention back to the mysterious presence in the woods.

The sounds continued. For the time being, ‘twould seem the newcomers didn’t know Sybilla was there.

She nudged her horse toward a stand of bushes and small trees, just filling in with buds and leaves in the earliest stages. ‘Twas enough cover, if she didn’t move, to conceal her until they were close.

As they rode by, she could hear them speaking. Two men. Dressed as Highlanders. Speaking Gaelic.

She couldn’t understand a thing they said, save one: *Máel Coluim*. Malcolm.

Sybilla’s pulse raced. For a moment, she’d thought they were men of Calder. But all the men had gone. Surely Ronan wouldn’t waste men spying on his own keep. Nay, they had to be Malcolm’s men, scouting ahead of the army.

Her blood ran cold, ice in her veins. Was the army coming to Calder? Were they already at Elgin? A thousand questions flooded her fracturing mind.

At the first opportunity, Sybilla raced toward Calder. Her poor palfrey could hardly catch a breath when they reached the far edge of the glen, beginning a hasty ascent to the courtyard outside the keep. She dismounted in one swift motion, handing her reins to Rory and nodding to Colin that she was alright.

“Adelina!” she yelled, rushing into the keep. “Adelina!”

Sybilla was across the great hall and nearly to the solar when Adelina appeared from a different corridor. “What is it?” she asked, her voice filled with concern.

“Malcolm’s scouts. I saw two Highlanders along the border, just on the other side of the glen.”

Adelina fell into the nearest chair. “They had to have been

Malcolm's." Her tone was flat, utterly certain. "Ronan didn't leave anyone behind, except men who are too old and too young."

"I feared as much," Sybilla said, sitting beside her. "You're sure he didn't leave anyone to keep watch, in case of a surprise attack?"

Adelina turned a sorrowful gaze toward her. "There was no one to leave. The men are outnumbered. Vastly outnumbered, even with all those they recruited from the villages."

Sybilla's chest ached in worry over Fintan even as she placed a hand on Adelina's. "What can I do?"

"Care for those who are left," she managed with a smile. "Help me bring everyone inside the palisades, just in case. I'll dispatch a rider to Elgin right away. If they're scouting here, then the army is nearer than we realized."

Sybilla nodded, standing to start rounding up outlying villagers. Before she reached the other side of the hall, Adelina spoke up once more.

"And Sybilla? Promise me you won't do anything rash. I assure you, I'll let you know if I need you."

Sybilla rolled her eyes in good humor. "I ought to be offended, you know," she remarked.

"I'm not the one who snuck onto a cart." Adelina winked at her before hurrying deeper into the keep.

Colin had already left the stables when Sybilla returned to apologize for her harsh tone earlier. She had hoped to tell him not to go riding, ironic though it seemed, but she'd have to wait until he came to the cottage for dinner.

Ismay collapsed in a fit of melancholy when she heard that her beloved had not yet arrived and the enemy was at their doorstep. She thanked Sybilla, stumbling out of the cottage in stunned silence.

Morna prepared dinner while Sybilla and Cait played with Lochie. Bree told them fanciful stories about giant worms. And Colin never came home.

When he missed dinner, she was angry. When the rest of the family had gone to bed, she was furious.

"I wouldn't worry," Morna told her. "He sometimes goes to the

old fort, especially when Fintan's gone or he wants to do some thinking. He'll be back in the morn for his porridge."

A shiver of trepidation coursed through her. After the conversation they'd had, he may well be doing some thinking. "The old fort? Is it close by?"

Morna shrugged, spooning some broth into Lochie's waiting mouth. "'Tis halfway between here and Elgin."

Sybilla hadn't yet told Morna that there may very well be an army right about there, at the very least a scouting party. With the young ones around, it hadn't seemed appropriate. As far as Morna knew, the battle was weeks from now.

The more Sybilla thought on it, the more she knew something was wrong. Either he'd decided to go to the fort, as Morna suggested, or he'd decided to take the message to Ronan himself. After what he'd said on their ride, and the fact that he'd disappeared shortly afterward, Sybilla reached a horrifying conclusion. He'd headed to Elgin to try to help. To prove himself to his brother. That was what he'd said, wasn't it? That he wished there were a way he could help, that he didn't want to be left out of the battle? It looked like she'd have to break her promise to Adelina after all. She left when the moon was high, hoping she wasn't too late.

Chapter Thirty-One



March 11, 1137
Elgin, Scotland

When dawn broke over Elgin, Fintan's foggy mind refused to stir. He opened his stubborn eyes, the peak of the thick woolen tent above him coming slowly into view. Shadows of the trees above swayed in a mesmerizing dance on the heavy fabric as his mind awakened.

His only goal was to survive the coming battle by getting some rest and keeping a clear head. If he died, it would fall to Morna and Colin to raise the three young ones while supporting the family.

Tendrils of cold fear gripped his stomach like an iron gauntlet. He couldn't leave them to fend for themselves. For their sake, he had to not only win, but to live. A formidable challenge, as they were outnumbered at least two to one by his estimation. Forcing himself to stand, he dressed as quickly as he could manage, grabbed his sword, and left his tent.

At present, his plan was going terribly. He'd meant to fall asleep early, to the ridicule of the men up into the night using liquid spirits to boost their own flagging confidences.

Instead, he'd tossed and turned until exhaustion overtook him. Sybilla's face, her voice, her faint scent of lavender assaulted him the night through. Guilt, followed by the reverberating pang of regret, left him restless.

A crooked line of men of all ages and levels of experience stood along the practice field. Fintan fell into line to run drills with the laird and his kinsmen. He needed all the practice he could get. By the looks of them, so did many of those in front of him.

Why had he been so cold toward Sybilla? She'd done nothing but help him, in so many ways. She cared for his family like her own. She was defiant and strong-willed, aye, but she had a grasp on what was truly important.

Around the outside of the training field onlookers had gathered to watch the lairds of Calder, Drummond, and MacMaster battle the men in line. Some of them looked as though they could use the

practice as well. Instead, they stood cheering or leering as they saw fit, enjoying a bit of sport before risking their lives to protect the clans.

Fintan took several steps forward as the man in front of him rushed to spar with Laird Alec MacMaster. Fintan watched, but he didn't see the match. His mind was far afield.

He should never have doubted Sybilla. He shouldn't have ignored her upon his return. And, without a doubt, he *should* have swept her into his arms and told the entire village that he would be marrying her. She deserved at least that much scandal, and Lord knew she wanted it.

"Next!"

Instead he'd made a muck of things. He'd upset her and then proceeded to order her about because of his own fears. Just like her father had. If he made it through this battle, he'd find a way to make it right.

"Fintan!" Ronan roared, panting from exertion and covered in sweat and dirt.

Instinct took over. Fintan sprinted to Ronan, ready for combat.

Ronan growled, his eyes burning with intensity. "I'm not going to let you die. Focus!"

Fintan went on the offensive, swinging wildly at Ronan to confuse him.

His laird blocked his thrust, grinning like a madman at Fintan's furious onslaught. "Welcome back, old friend," he ground out, lifting his sword.

Fintan smiled back at him, blocking the heavy blow.

They continued, attacking, defending, over and over, until Ronan's breathing grew heavy.

Fintan knew the laird was weary. He'd been fighting off and on since dawn. If Fintan paid attention, caught a mistake, he could take the victory.

Almost as soon as Fintan had the thought, Ronan's foot missed a step. He couldn't put the proper weight behind his attack; he was off-center.

Fintan cut his block short. Instead he attacked out of turn, knocking Ronan to the ground.

Ronan beamed at him. “When we meet Malcolm in battle,” he said, catching his breath, “do *that*. Don’t let anything else in your mind save your strategy to win.”

Fintan nodded, also catching his breath. He’d not been practicing as often since his mother had died. His skill with the sword could use some honing. Before he could answer Ronan, the sound of a rider approaching drew everyone’s attention.

Sybilla dismounted at the stables, within clear sight of the practice field.

Fintan’s stomach flipped over itself. She’d ridden to Elgin. Alone.

He had a hundred questions, but instead of assuming the worst, Fintan decided to trust her. He’d doubted her too many times. Whatever the reason, she surely had good cause to be here.

Wispy tendrils of her wheaten hair escaped from her long braid in the morning breeze. Her cheeks pinkened in the chill air. She’d never looked more beautiful.

His hammering heart reminded him how he ached for her. Why he hadn’t held her in his arms, kissed her senseless, bedded her until the moment he’d left Calder was utterly beyond him. He’d been a fool.

He strode up to her, without a care for who was watching, and pulled her into his embrace.

At first, she stood still in surprise. Then her arms wrapped around his neck, her head nuzzled into his shoulder. The scent of lavender surrounded him once again.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into her silken tresses, “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you.”

Sybilla pulled back, her eyes wide and vulnerable.

He cupped her face in his hand, his thumb on her cheek. He was about to kiss her, when she spoke.

“Is Colin here?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, confused. “Why would Colin be here?”

Sybilla shuffled her feet, taking a step further from him.

Wringing her hands. “He was upset yesterday,” she explained softly. “He wanted to come here with you. I thought he was feeling better, but...”

“But what?” Fintan’s chest felt hollow as he prompted her. He had a sick feeling he knew what she was about to say.

“He never came home. I thought he must’ve tried following you.”

Fintan swore, running his hand through his hair. When he turned back to Sybilla, he barely had control of his anger. “He’d never be so foolish. He’s a young lad, aye, but not foolhardy enough to come to Elgin on his own. He’s too young to fight and he knows it.”

“Knowing it and accepting it are two different things,” she pointed out gently.

Fintan shook his head vehemently. He refused to believe his brother would do something so foolish. “When did you see him last?” There had to be another explanation.

Sybilla took another step away from him. Her lips formed a thin line before she answered him, as though trying to keep herself from speaking. “He went riding with me.”

Fintan felt like he’d been slapped. “*What?*” he shouted. “Not only did you do the *only thing* I asked you not to do, but you dragged my baby brother along with you and *lost him*? Am I understanding that right?”

Sybilla’s chestnut eyes widened, but she stood her ground. “He was reaching out to me,” she argued. “I could tell he needed to talk with someone.”

“A hell of a lot of good it did,” Fintan shot back. “I told you not to go riding and I told him not to do anything foolish. Does no one listen to a word I say?”

Her resolve finally snapped. Azure fire burned in her eyes, and now she stalked forward, waving her finger at him. “Well, *maybe* he’s tired of everyone telling him what he can and cannot do. Sometimes a lad needs to go his own way to prove himself.”

Fintan’s eyes narrowed. “A lad,” he fumed, his voice a thin whisper, “or a spoiled lass?”

“You don’t mean that.” Her lips parted, her eyes bored into his very soul.

All thought fled Fintan save his fear for his brother. Anger descended upon him, an angel of vengeance out for blood. “You didn’t think of anyone but yourself. *You* put my brother in danger.”

Sybilla went still, silent. She stared at him, her eyes glistening with silvery tears barely held back. “If that’s what you think, then you don’t know me at all. You’re not the man I thought you were, Fintan mac Gille.” Without another word, she rushed past him toward Ronan.

Fintan watched her walk away, reeling from the blow of losing his betrothed and his brother in a moment’s time. For though neither had said as much, he knew this breach created a wound that could not heal. He doubted he would trust Sybilla to care for his family again.

Chapter Thirty-Two



Tears stung Sybilla's eyes. Surely now he hated her. How could he not? He'd made it perfectly clear that in his mind, she was responsible for his brother's disappearance. And the lad was young. If something happened to him, she'd blame herself as well.

She rushed away from Fintan, her mind spinning, her chest aching. At first, she considered running back to her horse and riding off as fast as the beast could carry her.

But Sybilla was done running. She'd escaped her father, for now at least, and she'd found adventures aplenty. Fintan might not want her any more, and though the thought of living without him left her hollow, she wasn't about to be the selfish, spoiled noble he'd accused. Nay, instead of running away and licking her wounds, Sybilla was going to find Colin.

As he wasn't here, Sybilla realized Morna's sisterly instincts may have been correct. Colin must have gone to the fort to think.

A large group of men surrounded a beaten-down square of earth, staring at her as she strode toward the practice yard. The waist-high fence around half of it appeared to be as much for seating as for maintaining any boundaries. In the center of the open yard, Ronan, Alec, and Aidan watched her approach.

"Ronan, may I speak with you a moment?"

Ronan looked from Sybilla to Fintan, tightened his lips, and nodded his head to the far side of the yard.

"Well that was quite a scene," he remarked drily, once they were out of hearing of the others.

"That was none of your business." Sybilla didn't have time for another argument. She needed to find Colin before those scouts did, and he'd already been gone nearly a full day. "I need your help."

"Mine and not Fintan's?"

Sybilla waved a hand dismissively. "Where is the old fort?"

Ronan's eyes narrowed. "*That* sounds like trouble. I don't know what you're up to, but Fintan would murder me, laird or no, if I sent

you into the wilderness on your own.”

“I don’t much care what Fintan thinks right about now.” Sybilla took a step toward him, attempting her best withering stare. “And consider this. I will be riding into the wilderness alone whether you help me or not. At least with your guidance, I’ll be there and back quicker.”

“I don’t like this one bit, Sybilla,” Ronan ground out, his voice low. “As your host, I am responsible for your safety. Between your outrageous father and soon-to-be husband, I will be held responsible should your journey go poorly.”

“They both know I’m unbiddable,” she replied. Then his words sank in. “Wait, he told you we were betrothed?”

Ronan’s lips lifted into a charming half-smile. “In the interest of getting through this disagreement, I’ll make you a deal. I will give you the information you ask, if you fix whatever the hell just happened with Fintan. That man doesn’t need any more trouble.” With his last word, Ronan nodded emphatically in her direction.

Sybilla folded her arms across her chest. “The only way to fix it is for you to tell me what I want to know.”

Ronan sighed.

‘Twas music to Sybilla’s ears. She knew a sigh of resignation when she heard one.

“An hour’s ride due west of here, you’ll find a fort used by the kings of old. ‘Twas abandoned generations ago. ‘Tis easy to find—the tower yet rises above the tree line when you’ve come close enough. *And* I want you to head straight back to Calder when you’re through. You belong in the fortified keep, not here at the battlefield.”

Sybilla turned and headed straight for her horse, shouting a perfunctory “Thank you!” as she left. Until a final thought occurred to her. She turned back around, facing Ronan once more. “You received Adelina’s message, right? The rider found you?” She’d have thought they’d be doing more than sparring with the army so near.

Ronan stalked toward her, confusion warring with alarm on his face. “What rider?”

God’s bones. He didn’t know. Before she could answer, someone

screamed.

The sounds of swordplay intensified, and it no longer held the lightness of sparring.

Ronan and Sybilla turned as one, just in time to see the front lines of Malcolm's army breaking through the tree line and marching on the practice field.

"Run, Sybilla! Get out of here!" Drawing his sword, Ronan led his scrambling men to defend their village.



Colin was missing. Fintan had hardly any time to recover from that horrific revelation when Sybilla divulged that she'd been involved in his disappearance. In a matter of moments, his world had come crashing down around him.

Needing some space, Fintan returned to his tent, collapsing on his cot. He shared the small tent with several other warriors from Calder, all of whom were currently out sparring in the practice field. They were good men, but right now he was grateful for their absence. He rubbed his temples, replaying the horrid conversation once more in his mind.

As his anger waned, Fintan's worries multiplied. Worse than believing Sybilla had let him down, was the knowledge that he had pushed her away. Now his brother might be dead, and he had no idea where Sybilla had gone.

Shouts sounded in the distance. A scream. Then another.

Fintan leaped to his feet, grabbing his sword. As he hurried out of the tent a herald rode by, shouting. "They're marching on Elgin!" he called over and over as he carried the news to the warriors.

They ran back to the practice field, but this time 'twas no sparring match. Malcolm's army swarmed the field, overtaking it with ease. Aidan stood in the center of the melee, fighting for his life.

"Fall back!" Ronan shouted, raising his sword. "Fall back!" His voice was barely audible over the din of the battle surrounding them.

A few warriors nearby heard the call. They turned, retreating toward MacMaster Keep. The rest continued to defend fiercely.

Fintan didn't think. He reacted.

He charged into the fray, sword at the ready.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Shock turned sharply to flight. Sybilla ran, as ordered, back toward her horse. She didn't have time to worry over herself right now, or even the men defending Elgin—though Lord knew if she took the time she'd dissolve into a panic over it. But she didn't have time for panic. She was the only one who could help Colin, so that's what she was going to do.

One hour.

Hopefully 'twas soon enough.

Riding at a racing pace, Sybilla hoped she hadn't made a huge miscalculation in going to Elgin first. She'd truly believed Colin had gone there, and all she could think was that her mistake might have cost Colin his life. She had to find Colin. She had to get them safely to Calder.

A hundred things could go wrong, but she had to try.

The glen undulated like a wave of green beneath her palfrey's hooves. She neared the forest's edge and a pang of misgiving slowed her to a trot. In all her thought of finding Colin, Sybilla hadn't considered her own safety.

Panic threatened. A knot formed in the pit of her stomach. And then the look of disappointment on Fintan's face reminded her of the reason she left her home in the first place: to have an adventure.

Urging her mount into the wakening woods, Sybilla realized that she hadn't only wanted adventure. Much like Colin, she'd wanted the opportunity to prove that she was capable, that she could do far more than anyone believed of her.

It wasn't long before the crumbling stone tower appeared on a distant horizon.

Swallowing her fear, Sybilla rode directly for it. Even if Fintan never forgave her, she couldn't let anything happen to Colin.

As she neared the tower, she slowed to a stop, taking in her surroundings.

The old fort barely stood. Any inclement weather could have

toppled the uneven pile of stones that remained intact. The ruins sat atop a hill, surrounding by a wide flat circle that looked much like a bailey. Around the circle, a wide, deep ravine had once safeguarded against invaders.

A rustling of underbrush drew Sybilla's attention in the trees to her left, half a mile further around the fort. Her horse's ears twisted toward the sound. She sat poised, waiting to see who was coming. Was it Colin?

Before even a moment had passed, another noise drew her attention directly across from her.

"Sybilla!"

Colin ran into view on the far side of the fort, emerging from the tree line waving his arms.

Sybilla's stomach lurched. If Colin was on the far side of the fort, the other riders had to be the two MacCready scouts who'd been searching the area yesterday. "Colin, no!" she cried.

But 'twas too late. The two scouts had gone after him as soon as he'd drawn attention to himself.

Sybilla watched in horror as Colin, realizing his mistake, scrambled down into the ravine. The two scouts' horses protested the jump, skittering and turning about instead of attempting it. They ran back toward the forest to try again.

And Sybilla dug in her heels.



They were going to lose.

Fintan knew it from the moment he'd stepped out of his tent. He'd been certain of it since they entered into the melee.

No one else was ready to admit it until the fully armored knights rode in.

Fintan fought alongside his clansmen, defending the keep at Elgin from the swarm of attackers. No one had expected a battle that day. Maybe tomorrow, or the next. But not today.

Sweat dripped from his brow, stinging his eyes. The metallic smell of blood filled his nostrils and burned his throat. Death surrounded him.

“Retreat! To Calder!” Aidan’s order rang out over the clashing steel.

Fintan looked up after finishing his opponent. Those of his clansmen left standing ran for the cover of the trees, pursued by a newly-arrived contingent of armored knights.

Swearing an oath, he quit the battle, following the men into the forest.

MacMaster Keep was lost.

‘Twas no time to mourn it, though. If he wanted to survive, he’d have to keep moving. The knights would pursue them a good distance, no doubt. His only hope of survival was that they turned back to hold the keep instead of slaying every last one of his fellow warriors.

Fintan ran as fast as his feet would carry him. Over logs and brambles, through bushes, past stones. Around trees and under branches. He flew with the will of one who would live.

Ronan and Aidan moved nearby, their faces a grim mask of rage at the loss.

He’d seen neither Alec nor Donnan since the battle began. He prayed for their safety as he fought for breath.



“I can make it. I can make it. I can make it.” Sybilla whispered the phrase to herself as she rode headlong for the ravine. No matter how many times she said it, she struggled to believe it. But whether she believed or not, she would be upon the ravine in moments—and not a moment too soon.

The other two riders were already preparing their next attempt, taking off at a charge that would intersect Sybilla’s crossways. Unless she was faster. Unless she made the jump first.

Colin had climbed up the ravine and was running across the flat sward surrounding the fort. The same fear shone in his eyes as she felt running through her. This, she decided as she approached the jump, was more than enough adventure for a lifetime.

The horse raised its front, beginning the jump.

Sybilla let her body follow the horse’s lead. Back straight, eyes on Colin. Legs tucked in, following the contour of the horse’s belly.

Her knees bent sharply as the horse reached the height of the jump.

Almost as soon as she'd left the ground, Sybilla landed on the far side of the ravine. She'd made the jump.

Colin beamed at her as he ran over.

With strength born of desperation and fear, Sybilla lifted him onto the horse behind her. She turned around. There was no time to waste.

The scouts had gotten their mounts to attempt the jump, but hadn't made it. They were riding up from the bottom of the ravine, no less concerning for their undignified state.

"Do as I do," Sybilla shouted, spurring the horse once more toward the ravine. Once more, her knees rose and her body fell forward. She kept her legs in, her eyes locked on her landing.

Colin did everything right, but the horse couldn't handle the extra weight. They just missed the far side. The horse's back legs slid down while Sybilla fought to move them forward.

"They're coming!" Colin's panic-stricken voice sounded from behind her. His arms tightened around her waist. "They'll catch us!"

Sybilla smiled to herself. She didn't need to look behind her. She knew they'd never catch her. She never lost a race.



Screams and hoofbeats followed him until midday. Fintan had managed to find a place to hide, rest, and recover his breath before continuing back toward Calder. On foot, the journey took an entire day. In his mind, it felt an eternity.

Chaos pursued him. Exhaustion consumed him. As he neared the boundary of his physical limits, Fintan's thoughts wandered to things nearer his heart.

He'd been furious when Sybilla told him about Colin. Furious, and terrified. And more than a little helpless. Aye, he'd blamed her because she stood before him. Because she'd gone riding.

But the more he thought it over, the more he realized how wrong he'd been.

Oh, he'd been right enough that riding while a battle is on the horizon wasn't safe. But Sybilla had gotten his brother back from the

ride. Colin had left on his own. If Fintan had been there instead of Sybilla, would it have gone any differently? Likely not.

As he thought back on all the times she'd been there since leaving her father, Fintan quickly realized what a fool he'd been. Long before they'd been betrothed, Sybilla had helped him again and again. Without being asked. Without complaint.

And he'd called her selfish.

Now she was risking her own safety to find his brother, even though she likely thought Fintan no longer wanted her. The very idea brought a wrenching ache to his chest. How could he have been such a fool?

If, by some miracle, he ever saw her again, Fintan swore he'd make it up to her.

Chapter Thirty-Four



They'd made it. Sybilla had gotten them away, turning sharply around trees and through thickets until the scouts could no longer keep pace in the difficult terrain.

As Sybilla and Colin headed for Calder, they realized immediately that all was not right. They had not gone far when they ran into a group of warriors sprinting in a panic.

"To Calder!" the men shouted as they hurried past.

"What's happened?" Sybilla called back, following after them to hear their reply.

"Elgin has fallen!" Disjointed voices told her that the worst had happened.

Her heart faltered, the blood draining from her face. An ache started to form in her chest, but she didn't let it take hold quite yet.

The battle was lost, along with the MacMaster stronghold. The warriors fled for their lives. The sound of heavy horses rumbled in the distant woods.

"Fintan mac Gille! Have you seen him?" She couldn't help but ask as her darkest fears crept to the forefront of her thoughts.

The men didn't answer. They kept running.

Sybilla had never felt so torn. Every fiber of her being compelled her to rush forward, headlong into the battle, to find and aid Fintan. What if he were wounded? What if he lay bleeding? If she found him, she could save him.

Yet she had to think of Colin. Fintan would want her to protect his family first. If she and Colin headed toward Elgin, 'twas unlikely to end well.

"We have to go find him!" Colin urged, looking in horror at the scene unfolding before them.

Tears of frustration threatened her resolve. Somehow, she managed to shake her head. "We can't. If Fintan lives," she called behind her, "he'll be heading this way."

Colin cried out in disagreement, but Sybilla continued toward

Calder, her heart breaking more with each step.



A thunder of horses clamored ahead in the thick forest.

Fintan stopped. Had MacCready's armored knights somehow ended up in front of him? Was he running the wrong way?

He looked up, gauging whether he'd veered off-course since leaving Elgin. Then he heard more horses approaching behind him.

Fear ripped through Fintan. Surely the MacCready knights were behind him. Who was before him?

'Twasn't long before he had his answer. King David himself emerged, leading his vast army. His grim countenance told Fintan that he'd already heard of the loss of Elgin.

Not long afterward, Donnan and Alec hurtled into sight on horseback behind him. "They're coming!" Alec shouted. "MacCready's knights are right behind us!"

Fintan swore, hurrying into the lines of David's army to fight once again.

David's spearmen broke the charge, a paltry one at that. Most of the horses couldn't even manage a canter with the proliferation of trees and underbrush. Then he sent his own knights to do battle, leaving Fintan and the other men on foot to deal with stray riders.

In the midst of it all, Donnan and the MacCready commander crossed swords in mounted combat. The MacCready commander charged straight at Donnan, nearly knocking him from his mount with the force of his attack. After several sword strokes, Donnan unhorsed the man, dismounting himself to continue the battle on foot.

The commander was a skilled swordsman, but at a disadvantage. Wearing full armor, he tired far more quickly. Though he managed to give Donnan a good run, eventually Donnan knocked him out.

"Capture the leader!" David commanded.

Donnan grinned, tying the unconscious knight over his own horse.

Morale failed quickly once the leader was taken captive. Some of the knights fled immediately. A few continued fighting.

Fintan found an abandoned horse and took it for his own, riding

over to congratulate Donnan on his hard-won victory.

David hurried over, his expression dark. “There’s no reason to celebrate until we’ve returned,” he growled. “Let’s get the captive to Calder before his men return for him.”



By the time Sybilla and Colin arrived back at Calder, several things had happened. Shortly after Sybilla left for Elgin that morning, David’s army arrived from Roxburgh. In short order, Adelina had sent them east toward Elgin to meet up with Ronan’s men there.

Instead of getting to Elgin, David’s forces intercepted Malcolm’s somewhere between the two keeps. Because of their aid, Malcolm’s army returned to Elgin instead of continuing its pursuit.

And, somehow, Sybilla and Colin had gone around all of it.

They returned to Calder around dinner time. A slow trickle of retreating warriors wandered into the village late in the afternoon.

Gemma and Adelina treated the wounded. Nora, reclining in Calder’s most comfortable chair, and Ismay, hurrying about relaying orders, oversaw the running of the keep. Sybilla brought the exhausted men food and water. No one spoke of the defeat. No one mentioned the men who hadn’t yet returned.

As she wandered through the growing field of resting warriors, Sybilla looked at every single face. Fintan, Ronan, Aidan, Alec, and Donnan were still missing.

Adelina walked by, checking a man who’d been stabbed. She looked at Sybilla, her brows knitted tightly. “They probably ran into David and couldn’t decide whether to kill him or thank him,” she offered, wringing a bloodied washrag.

Or they’d all been captured or killed, Sybilla thought. ‘Twas likely not a coincidence that all the leaders of the army were still gone.

As the sun’s parting rays faded, five women stood atop the motte beside Calder Keep, whispering prayers into the falling darkness.

“They should be here by now.” Gemma put voice to their deepest fears.

Adelina inhaled slowly, deeply. “Men are still arriving from

Elgin. If they stayed to help everyone get away, they'll be the last ones."

"And David's army has not yet returned," Ismay added hopefully. "I bet they'll come back with him."

Sybilla looked to Nora, the only one who hadn't commented. A single tear ran down her cheek, leaving a glimmering trail to her chin.

She put her arm around Nora, giving her a supportive squeeze. "He'll be back," she whispered, hoping she spoke true. "They all will be."

Sybilla wasn't one to put much stock in magic. But the moment she said those words, the front lines of an army came into view from out of the tree line.

"It's David!" Ismay shouted, jumping up and down several times before turning toward the keep. "I'll have the cook put something together for them!" She disappeared in a flurry of excitement that only Ismay could muster.

Seven riders pulled ahead of the front line.

Sybilla recognized six of them, but only one sent flutters through her core. Fintan lived. And he was riding toward her, across the bailey and up the motte.

It felt like an eternity before he reached her, slipping straight from the horse into her embrace. His mouth found hers before she could utter a word. He kissed her there, in front of hundreds of people.

She only saw him.

She felt his need, his relief, his gratitude in every brush of his lips.

He kissed her like he couldn't live without her.

"I'm so sorry, Fintan. I'm so sorry that—"

He put his hand over her mouth, frowning at her. "Don't apologize," he ordered sternly. "'Tis I who owe you an apology. I should never have blamed you for Colin's disappearance."

Sybilla took his hand off her mouth, holding it between her own. "He's back. He's safe now."

"I want to hear all about your adventure." Fintan's sky blue eyes

took a long, simmering look at her before leading her toward the keep. “But first, they’ll want to discuss Elgin.”

His gaze sent shivers of excitement through her. “What happened?”

Fintan sighed. “They must have killed our scouts. When their knights arrived, we had already lost.”

“So they’ve taken Elgin,” she observed quietly.

“Not for long,” Fintan replied, his mouth cracking a faint smile. Sybilla looked at him askance, but he just shrugged.

“You’ll hear all about it momentarily,” he assured her as they entered the great hall alongside the clan’s leaders.

When everyone was seated and food served, the men gave their detailed accounts of the battle. When Donnan’s turn came around, he stood, slamming his tankard of ale onto the table dramatically. “I had a fine day,” he boasted with a grin.

“He captured a hostage,” Alistair explained to those who hadn’t been there.

“I’m telling the story!” Donnan berated his father.

Alistair held his hands out in peace, but didn’t look particularly penitent.

“Not just any hostage,” Donnan proclaimed, “but the leader of the armored knights himself! I fought him in a battle for the ages before finally capturing my foe!” His ale hit the table once more, followed by hearty cheers.

Sybilla thought wryly that perhaps Donnan had a future as a bard.

David, King of Scotland, who had personally brought his army to the aid of the clans, leaned back in his chair thoughtfully. “And what do you plan to do with your hostage?”

“Use him as leverage, of course.” Donnan took a gulping swig of ale. “We trade him for Elgin.”

“Malcolm will never give up a keep for one man,” Aidan countered. “Hundreds would die defending it before he would let it fall back to us.”

“We could burn it,” Nora said, shocking every person in the

room.

“You would burn your home?” Alec, Laird MacMaster, asked incredulously.

Nora shrugged. “They wouldn’t expect us to do it. And then we could build a stone keep, that we could better defend. If there isn’t a keep at Elgin, they couldn’t hold it.”

Alec’s mouth opened in horror at his wife’s suggestion. “You’ve never liked my keep,” he accused.

“And I’ve never made a secret of it.” She sat back, popping a cube of cheese into her mouth with a smirk.

David rubbed his graying temples. “We’ll circle back to that in a moment. For now, we need to decide what to do with the hostage.”

“I ordered some of my men to interrogate him,” Donnan told them. “Hopefully we can learn more of Malcolm’s strategy at the very least.”

David nodded agreement, but at that precise moment, one of Donnan’s men hesitantly entered the room.

“What is it, James?” Donnan didn’t look particularly pleased at the interruption.

James cleared his throat. His eyes darted around the room. “We have a, uh, problem,” he said weakly. “With the hostage.”

“What’s the problem with him?” It was David this time, looking impatient.

James looked to Donnan, who nodded, before answering. “Not with him, my lord. With *her*.”

Alistair chuckled in delight. “You nearly lost a battle with a *woman*!”

“I won!”

“You said it was a ‘battle for the ages’,” Ronan reminded him with glee.

As everyone fell into mirth at Donnan’s expense, he pushed his chair into the table.

“How did you not realize ‘twas a woman?” Ismay asked. “Couldn’t you tell by her face? Her hair?”

Donnan scowled. “He—she—wore a helmet. I left it on when we

tied her to a horse. And I refuse to believe any of this nonsense! James, surely you're mistaken. Did you grab the wrong person?"

With a look of apology, James motioned to someone behind him, outside the room. Three men dragged a shrieking woman, in full armor, into the room. It took all of them to keep her restrained. Though she was gagged, 'twas clear she was lobbing threats directly at Donnan, her eyes spitting the fire her mouth could not.

The look of horror on Donnan's face was almost amusing. "If you'll excuse me, I will see to this—problem—at once." He stormed out of the keep, James on his heels, the men dragging the captive slowly behind.

David sighed. "Perhaps we should get our rest and finish our planning in the morning. I'll be eagerly awaiting young Donnan's report."

As the gathering broke apart and folk began heading their separate ways for the night, Fintan pulled Sybilla close, his warm breath washing over her cheek. "My lady, I have a favor to ask of you," he whispered suggestively.

Sybilla leaned into him, letting every inch of her body brush against his. "Anything," she answered, matching his playful tone.

"I fear I'm in need of a bath after today's exertion," he said, taking her hand and leading her out of the keep, "but it'll be chilly this time of year. I was hoping you might be able to warm me up." He kissed her hand, his eyes never leaving hers.

Heat flooded Sybilla's body, an empty, aching burn that reached from her chest to her toes. She sent a prayer of gratitude heavenward, that Fintan had come back safely. Then she followed him to the loch, grinning like a fool at the prospect of her next adventure.

Epilogue



March 23, 1137
Calder, Scotland

“He said no.”

Fintan looked up from his newest whittling project, another ring. This one, however, was not for his baby brother. “What?” He didn’t know why he was shocked, but some part of him had hoped her father would approve their marriage.

Sybilla set down the letter she held, offering him a half-hearted shrug. “‘Tis no more than I expected. He’s intolerable.”

“What do we do?” Fintan was utterly outside his realm of knowledge. “Can we marry anyway? Is he going to try to take you back?”

She leaned forward, her loose golden braid falling over her shoulder. “We can do whatever we want,” she declared, sounding very much like the young woman who’d stowed away on a cart of baggage. “I never minded a scandal.”

Fintan snorted in amusement. “No,” he agreed, “you never did. But what if he comes here for you? Is there something within the law he could do to take you?”

“We aren’t important enough to require the king’s consent to my marriage,” she considered aloud. “If I get married before he comes, he couldn’t do a thing about it. I wasn’t betrothed before you, so I wouldn’t be breaking a vow.” She squinted into the distance, holding her chin with her hand as she continued her deliberations. “No, I think we’re safe,” she said at last.

“Wonderful.” Fintan grimaced as he made a poor cut on the wood. Luckily he could still fix it.

“Lochie already has two of those,” Sybilla observed, “I don’t think he needs another.”

“‘Tis not for Lochie.”

“Is it for wee Jennet?”

Fintan looked up at Sybilla and smiled warmly. She’d been here for weeks and already she sounded like a Scot. “No.”

Nora had delivered a healthy baby girl less than a week ago, naming her Jennet after Alec's mother.

Sybilla stood, walking over to him and moving his project aside. Sliding into his lap, she cupped his face in her hands. "Who is the ring for?"

A sigh escaped Fintan's lips as he realized she wouldn't let it rest. He had hoped to give it to her on their wedding day as a gift, but he supposed 'twas no less than he deserved for working on it right in front of her. "'Tis for you."

"But we don't have a baby."

"'Tis not for teething," he admitted. "'Tis a wedding ring. I'm still sizing it."

Her eyes lit up. "You made me a ring?" The awe in her voice swelled his chest.

"'Twas your idea." He thought back to the first time she'd interrogated him about his whittling. She'd listed only jewelry as she tried to guess his project.

She beamed at him.

He could tell she'd recalled the same memory.

"That's why I know I've chosen the right man." She wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing his cheek sweetly.

"Because I make you jewelry?"

"Because you bring my ideas to life," she corrected.

"Ugh, are you two done being gross?" Bree asked, entering the cottage with one bucket full of worms and another full of dirt.

"You said it, Bree," Colin agreed. "I almost gagged on my porridge."

Sybilla looked at the two buckets Bree held. "Why don't you have the worms in the dirt?"

Bree rolled her eyes. "I can't watch them if they're in the dirt."

Fintan could hardly keep from laughing at her exasperated tone. "You're watching worms all day and you think we're gross?"

"You are gross!" Cait chimed in, taking a giant bite of her porridge.

Morna giggled under her breath as she tidied the small kitchen.

“Well,” Fintan exhaled dramatically, looking wistfully into Sybilla’s eyes, “I suppose if we’re already gross, then kissing you won’t make it any worse.”

Shrieks of outrage and protest sounded from his siblings. But that didn’t stop Fintan from stealing a kiss from the woman who’d stolen his heart.



Want more?

[Sign up for our newsletter](#) and claim your *free* novella, *To Love a Laird!*

About the Author

A historian and archaeologist turned writer, Sophia has been making up stories since she could talk. When she isn't working on her next novel, you can find her in the garden. Sophia lives in Indiana with her husband, two children, and their menagerie of pets.